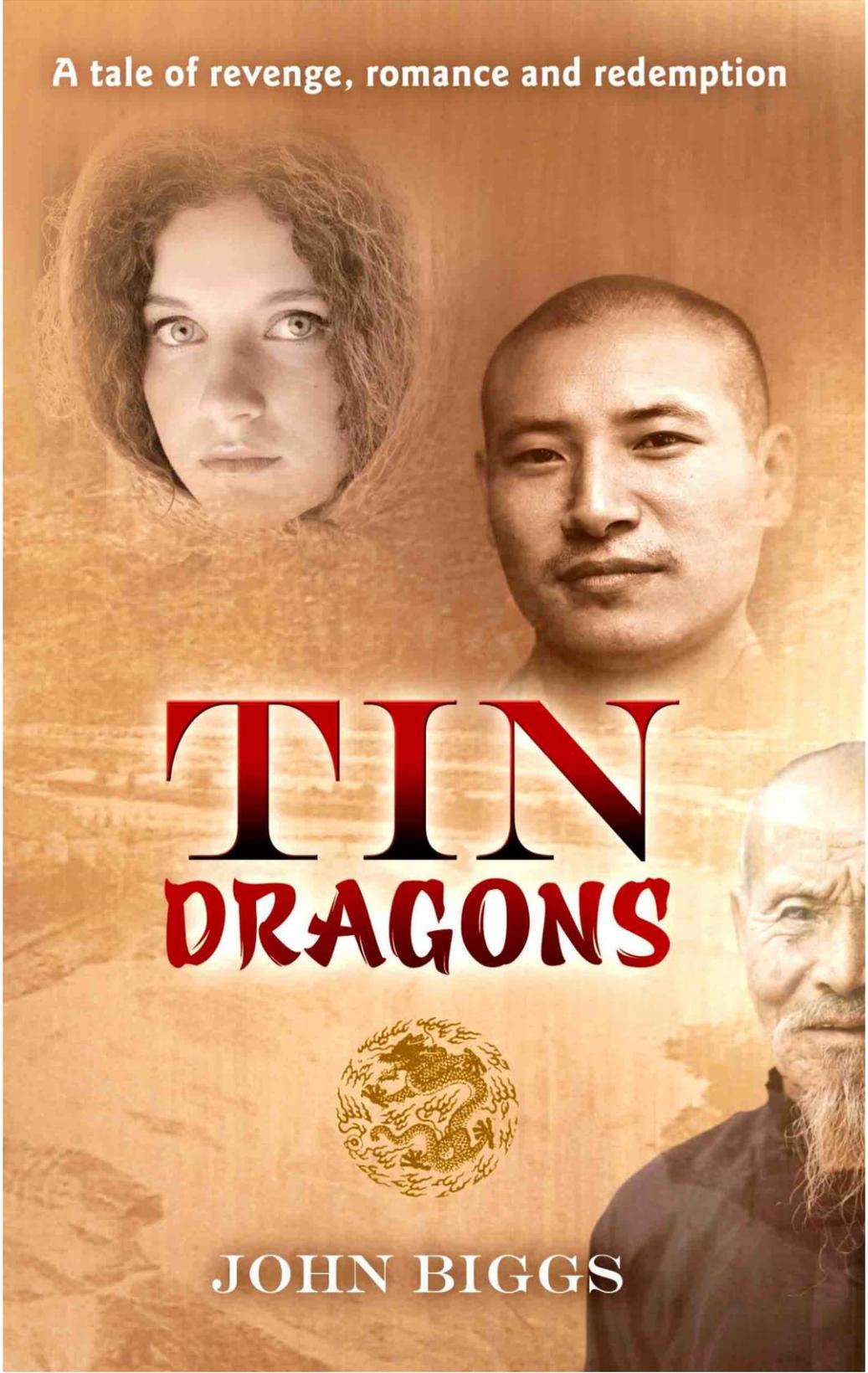


A tale of revenge, romance and redemption



TIN DRAGONS

JOHN BIGGS

Tin Dragons

**A Tale of Revenge, Romance and Redemption
in the Wilds of 19th Century Tasmania**

by

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By the same author

The Girl in the Golden House, Pandanus Books, 2003

Project Integrens, Sid Harta, 2006

Disguises, Burville Books, 2007 (as Sally Leigh)

And several prize-winning short stories

Preface

Tin Dragons is located in the North-East of Tasmania where my grandfather settled over a century ago. When I was a child, he told me interesting stories about the Chinese who re-settled in the Scottsdale region after the tin mines further east, in and around the Blue Tier, had closed.

Years later, I walked the Blue Tier, a mountain range overlooking the once-thriving mining town of Weldborough. I saw old railway tracks, water-races, a tunnel carved through solid rock, and many other relics left by the Chinese miners. The stories my grandfather had told me came flooding back; stories about those miners who, unlike most who returned to China with their ‘hundred gold sovereigns’, remained in Tasmania. I wondered how they had coped; with white prejudice, with language, with love. I wrote *Tin Dragons* in an attempt to find out. I had the assistance of a feisty young woman called Terry Conway, who jumped out of the pages and guided my fingers on the keyboard.

The following sources were useful in providing more stories and much authentic detail: Helen Vivian’s *Tasmania’s Chinese Heritage* (Victoria & Albert Museum, Launceston, 1985), Joan Scott’s *Celestial Sojourn* (St. Helen’s History Room Association, 1997), Eric Rolls’ *Sojourners* (University of Queensland Press, 1992), W.H. Macfarlane’s *History of North East Tasmania* (North-Eastern Advertiser, 2007), and A.W. Loone’s *Tasmania’s North-East* (Privately Published, 1928). I also obtained much useful information from John McCullum and staff at the St. Helen’s History Room and Visitors’ Information Centre, Rhonda Hamilton and Ross Smith of the Community History Room at the Victoria & Albert Museum, and Tony Marshall of the State Library of Tasmania, for which I am very grateful. But although I have salted my mine with as many grains of truth as I could find, it is a ‘duffer’, its lode fictional.

I have used town names that were used at the time of the story. ‘Thomas Plains’ is now Weldborough; ‘George’s River’ is St. Helens. ‘Nine Mile Springs’ became Lefroy in 1882, but the first name remained in use for several years afterwards; ‘Ellesmere’ was the official name of Scottsdale until 1893, but

‘Scottsdale’ was the name in general use before then. The Thomas Plains Joss House is now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, Launceston.

I thank *The Examiner* for permission to use the two letters in the opening pages of the book, and *The North-Eastern Advertiser* for permission to use the name of the paper on the fictional extract at the end of the book.

My thanks to Zoltan Dienes, Wan Lulu and Eunice Lai for helping with translating many of the *seng yu* and other proverbs into modern *pinyin*; to Rosie Dub, Richard Davis, Pete Hay, Philip Williams, Ross Telfer and an anonymous reviewer for reading and commenting on various drafts; to Alison Savage for her splendid editorial work; and to Maygog Publishing for a smooth and trouble-free run through to release.

My debt to Catherine Tang is special. She not only commented on various drafts and did the calligraphy, but as my patient and supportive partner, she fired up and constantly refuels my interest in matters Chinese.

John Biggs

Hobart, 2007

Sir, – I observe in Saturday's Examiner an article on the Chinese camp at Thomas' Plains which calls for notice from evident bias of the writer. I was living till three weeks ago about 200 yards from the camp, and have been frequently in it, but matters do not strike exactly as they do your correspondent...

There is certainly a great deal of immorality reported to exist on the Plains, but there is more credited to the Europeans than to the Chinese...

Letter to the Editor of *The Examiner*, the 5th of May, 1883.

Sir, – The stamp of Chinamen who come to these colonies are not of the highest order and on their arrival generally take on some European woman as a partner, and as no woman of any account will unite themselves to such beings, they as a rule pick up with very degraded scum of the earth and settle down in some tin or gold-mining district. The consequence is very easily foreseen. In years to come we shall have a little generation of vipers to deal with, whose amalgamation with the low European will form the essence of vice and crime, besides tarnishing the population with a tinge of orange, an importation of diseases unknown in the colonies at present.

Letter to the Editor of *The Examiner*, the 11th of November, 1883

**WHEN YOU OVERTURN THE NEST
LEAVE NO EGGS INTACT**

1

The division of horsemen with their red coats, blue trousers and glossy black topknots looked splendid as they thundered into the town of Lizhou. But the citizens shrieked and fled, for the colourful uniforms marked the invaders as the dreaded Tai Ping Revolutionary Army. The commander of the Army was Hong Xiu Quan, the Heavenly King, who believed himself to be the Younger Brother of Jesus Christ. He also believed that his Older Brother had sent him to smash the corrupt Ching Dynasty and its Imperial Court and to build in its stead the Heavenly City of Eternal Peace. Hong's army was relentlessly cruel in striving to achieve that goal.

But for Son Shui the brutal arrival of the army in Lizhou couldn't have been more welcome. He heard them gallop into the town with their battle shrieks, but he could not see them until a section of horsemen halted right in front of him. The corporal in charge drew his sword, thrusting the point onto Son Shui's cheek.

'Why are you wearing the *cangue*?' the corporal asked with a sneer.

The *cangue* was a collar made by the devil himself. It was a square wooden board out of which Son Shui's head protruded; it was so large his hands could not reach his mouth and so heavy he could barely stand. Thus encumbered, he had been placed on the street for public display. He could eat only when a kindly passer-by popped some food into his mouth, and drink only when someone gave him water. There were few kindly passers-by in Lizhou. Prisoners wearing the *cangue* usually did not last long. They died of starvation, thirst or simple exhaustion, as Son Shui well knew.

'B-because I'm an enemy of the Imperial Court,' Son Shui croaked. It sounded better than the truth, which was that he had been caught pickpocketing.

'Join our Army or die.'

'I'll j-join,' whispered Son Shui, barely able to move his cracked, dry lips.

'Your name?'

'Son Shui.'

A horseman who understood Hakka burst out laughing. ‘Son Shui? That’s no name for a soldier in the terrible army of our Heavenly King! Son Shui means “Calm Water”,’ he explained to the corporal.

Exhausted and starving as he was, Son Shui’s brain moved swiftly. ‘But my professional name is Wu Lei, “The Fox”. I too am as cunning and as swift to the kill as a fox.’

‘You look neither cunning nor swift right now, friend,’ the corporal chuckled. ‘But you’ll do. Release him, feed him and give him a uniform.’

Wu Lei revelled in being a soldier. He idolised his divine leader, the Heavenly King; he loved the discipline required by the Revolutionary Army. He could take out his own past hurts and humiliations, which were considerable, on the captured soldiers of the Imperial Army and on the villagers who supported the Imperial Manchus.

Wu Lei’s parents had been so poor that they had sold him at a tender age to a rich merchant. The man had treated the poor child cruelly, forcing him to work long hours and beating him savagely when he fell asleep on the job from sheer exhaustion. Wu Lei—the then Son Shui—aged only ten escaped one night through an unlocked window, after which he supported himself on the streets by thieving and pickpocketing. He once tried to pickpocket a Christian missionary but the latter was too quick: he seized the boy’s thin wrist, holding him tightly. The missionary, an Englishman from the London Missionary Society, was a kind man. When he heard Wu Lei’s story, his heart went out to the little chap. He took him back to his school for ragged orphans.

Wu Lei stayed with the mission for only as long as was necessary to learn what he needed to learn in order to pursue his chosen profession of thief and confidence trickster. He learned to talk well and convincingly in English, Mandarin and Cantonese, in addition to his native Hakka, and to write in Chinese and English. He ignored his other school subjects, including Divinity, which he was pleased to note exasperated his saviour mightily. His saviour would be even more exasperated, Wu Lei grinned to himself as he ran through the gates of the school for the last time, when he discovered the loss of a gold statuette of Jesus The Good Shepherd,

encrusted with precious stones, that had minutes previously been occupying pride of place in the missionary's study.

Wu Lei's education at the mission school had provided a valuable preparation for a Tai Ping soldier.

The Manchu Imperial Army eventually defeated the Tai Ping Revolutionaries. In 1864, Hong Xiu Quan, the Heavenly King, committed suicide. When the Revolutionary Army was officially no more, it broke up into undisciplined packs of wild dogs, most of the Tai Ping soldiers being, like Wu Lei himself, dislocated criminals. They became known as 'Hairy Thieves', after the topknots they still retained. The thieves hunted in packs, and like wild dogs, each pack had a hierarchy. Wu Lei's less than engaging habits swiftly saw him as bottom dog in his pack. His fellow curs teased him mercilessly.

'Wu Lei?' they laughed. 'You? No, not Wu *Lei*, The Fox, but Wu *Ying*, The Fly! That's you. You buzz around annoying us, your so-called comrades. You lie to us. You feed on whatever you can, just like a dirty fly. So Wu Ying are.'

And Wu Ying he remained. In fact, he came to like the name because it enabled him to enact an ancient Chinese saying: *cang ying bu ding feng dan* (flies do not infest an egg that has no cracks). Wu Ying was continually on the lookout for cracked eggs. He buzzed around people, feeding off their exuding weaknesses.

And even when there was nothing to be gained, he found irritating people an agreeable pastime in itself.

Hong Xiu Quan had commanded the Tai Ping Revolutionary Army with the aid of strategies and maxims drawn from the ancients. He had two favourites: *fan jian ji* (plan for greatest disharmony) and *fu chao zhi xia wu wan luan* (when you overturn the nest leave no eggs intact). When the packs of Hairy Thieves continued their now politically pointless rape and pillage of the countryside, they applied these strategies ruthlessly.

The village of Kam Fu Tsuen in Kwongtung Province was the next nest that Wu Ying's pack planned to overturn. Only eight horsemen remained from the

original platoon but they were more than enough to ransack a village if they followed another aphorism: *gong qi wu bei* (take the enemy by surprise). With hearts lusting for blood and loins aching for violent release, the Hairy Thieves rode cautiously under cover to regroup in line behind a tree, only a couple of minutes' fierce riding from the village gate. The leader raised aloft the tattered black silk flag affixed to his lance, as if to perpetuate the illusion they were still a military unit. Each horseman read the eyes of his neighbour and saw hot agreement. The leader nodded. His lance now in the attack position, he screamed 'EEE-YAAAAaaaa!' as his horse leapt forward. The others immediately took up the cry, their horses' hooves pounding like volleys of cannon as they stormed the village.

Two bloody and supremely satisfying hours later, seven horsemen rode eastwards out of Kam Fu Tsuen, their saddles laden with booty, each dwelling on their own particular rewards and pleasures of the recent hunt. The eighth horseman, Wu Ying, was charged as underdog with the task of remaining to check that no intact eggs remained. As Wu Ying was returning to catch up with the others, a little boy stumbled into Wu Ying's path. The boy froze, arms thrust in front of him, palms forward, as if to push the horrific image of a blood-soaked soldier away. Wu Ying laughed, drew his sword, and bent low in the saddle to slaughter the little insect where he stood.

The boy stared at him with huge eyes, his head tilted backwards, his little arms rigid, his body paralyzed. Wu Ying leaned forward and touched him delicately on the cheek with the blood-wet blade of his sword, marking the spot where he might make an initial satisfying slash. Then he had a better idea. 'No, little fellow, I won't kill you now. You go back home. See what we have done, ha ha!'

And with that he galloped off, forgetting he had disobeyed the solemn maxim endorsed by the Heavenly King.

He had left one egg intact.

SEK LUNG

2

As I edge closer I see that my home is nothing but a shell of hot stone, a giant, ruined, pig oven. Outside is a pile of charred bodies, like discarded, overcooked pigs. Where are Ah Ma, Ah Ba and Older Sister? Are they in that pile? I crawl on all fours, hand over hand, keeping low, not knowing what might be lying in wait for me. There! Is this what the horseman with the evil eyes was telling me to find?

EEYAAA! Suddenly, I'm surrounded by shrieking, yelling Hairy Thieves. One is raising his sword ...

Ah Yan awoke, drenched in sweat. It seemed that just when things were turning his way, some bastard god was intent on reminding him of that dreadful day. Yet the scene is just that little bit different in each nightmare.

But this time, even after he'd awoken, the shrieking continued, jagged, piercing. Then suddenly it stopped.

Ah Yan sat up in blackness so thick it filled his mouth and throat with silence. Slopping, slapping water, creaking ropes, the squeak of flexing wood and muffled snoring eased into that silent void, reminding him of where he really was. It was 1887, not 1874. And he was on the *Sorell* on his way across Bass Strait to Launceston, not in his village of Kam Fu Tsuen in Kwongtung Province.

The shrieking? It was that Hakka he'd met yesterday who was having his own nightmares. The creature's long grey hair, which hung in tangles down his back like the mane of a Mongolian warhorse, revealed what would once have been the proud topknot of a soldier in the Tai Ping Revolutionary Army. Ah Yan thought that what he must have done as a Tai Ping soldier would have destroyed the mind of the devil himself.

Ah Yan lay down again, but sleep did not come. He played over in his mind what had happened yesterday as the ship was making its way out of Port Melbourne. That Hakka had sidled up to him, breathing garlic and God only knew what else, over his unwilling audience.

'Why go to Tasmania, friend? Mining is it? Gold? Tin?'

Ah Yan had wanted to tell him to mind his own business, but he'd answered him, to his immediate regret. 'Tin,' he'd replied.

The Hakka had grinned at that, his eyes black slits. While he was speaking, he kept running his fingers through the filthy string of a moustache that was tacked over his mouth. 'Tin's finished, friend. Your agent tricked you. If I were you, I should not alight at Launceston. I'd stay aboard and return to Melbourne.'

Ah Yan hadn't believed him. He had a contract to start work in Mr. Lee's mine at Emu Flat. Mr. Lee had also paid his fare. Ah Yan knew that none of this would have happened to him if there was no means for him to repay that debt. But this Hakka was more than mischievous; he had an aura of evil about him. Ah Yan had turned his back on him, heading aft. But the demon had scented a victim. He followed, his harsh metallic voice prophesying certain misfortune.

This spectacle, of a tall, strong, young man being harassed and seemingly intimidated by a repellent gnome dressed in a dirty blue shirt and flapping trousers, had not gone unnoticed. Another man had been standing at the ship's rail, watching. The onlooker's face was broad and open, with kind creases at the edges of his eyes. He was solidly built, radiating strength as does an iron temple gate. The man had frowned at the sight of the young fellow stand there like one mesmerised before he turned his back to head aft, only to witness his tormentor follow him, still harassing him. He strode after the pair. Catching up with them, he addressed the young man in Cantonese.

'Ah, a fellow tin miner! I overheard your conversation. Oh no, believe me, there's plenty of tin to be found in Tasmania! I know, for that is my destination too. Take no notice of this fool.' He nodded to the Hakka, who had scowled and slunk off.

'My name is Lam Sing Chiu,' Ah Yan's saviour had said, 'but here in Australia I answer to Charlie Lam. And your name?'

Ah Yan's face had shone with gratitude. 'Tang Wing Yan. I do not have an English name.'

'Well, Ah Yan, you'll need to choose one. But all in good time.'

The *Sorell* was due to dock in Launceston shortly after noon, but the wind was mildly debating the matter. The sails drooped like inverted question marks, asking for direction. Ah Yan and Charlie were standing by the rail, looking for Tasmania, but it was not yet in sight. Sometimes the wind conceded a point and the boat dipped a little more than usual, spattering them with slop. Ah Yan would run his tongue over his mouth as far as he could stretch it, savouring the salty taste the spray left behind. A sea bird dived at them, squawking. Ah Yan squinted as the sun bounced across the broken mirror created by the slow swell of Bass Strait, hurting Ah Yan's eyes. He wondered how soon it would be before his eyes would see his new home.

'Ha! There!' As if reading the younger man's mind, Charlie pointed to a low bank of cloud on the horizon. 'Tasmania, Ah Yan, there is Tasmania!' He said it as if he expected to be congratulated on his discovery.

Ah Yan felt like he had just gulped a bowl of rice wine, leaving his stomach warm and excited. But he tried to remain matter-of-fact with his new friend. 'Ah yes, Charlie, our future home. How long do you intend to stay?'

'As long as it takes to return with wealth and honour.' He turned the ends of his lips down in a mocking smile. 'Isn't that why we Chinese leave home and go abroad to places like this?' He barked a laugh. 'But it's taking years longer than I expected.'

'Years? Why years?'

Charlie removed his hat, turned and bowed his head. At the base of his scalp was a bald, pink, roundish scar, the size of a child's hand.

'I had a queue before I went to Ballarat to mine gold. It was pulled out by drunken miners.'

Ah Yan was shocked, thanking whatever gods there might have been that he had his pigtail cut off before he left China. He had no wish to appear too different from the Europeans, but he hadn't dreamt that that particular difference might lead to such an atrocity.

Charlie continued. 'In Ballarat, I made enough in three years to return home with a great deal of honour. My wife and son live in Lung Shan, a village just outside Canton.' His voice caught. 'Wah, Ah Ping must be such a big boy now ...'

He recovered and continued. ‘A week before I was due to leave Ballarat, I did what I had to do: I enquired about passages and sold what I could. The European miners used to watch us. They waited for these signs knowing it meant that we had mined sufficient gold and were preparing to leave. They also knew where most of us hid it: sewn into the seams of our coats. So they mined their gold the easy way: they mined the miners. Three came to my tent one night, only three days before I was due to leave. They dragged me outside. One punched me so hard I fell to the ground, another removed my coat. The first one grabbed me by my queue and dragged me along the ground with it, while a third pissed on me. My queue came off in the white bastard’s hand. Then they kicked me and made off with my coat. It contained three pounds’ weight in gold. Worth more than twice the “one hundred gold sovereigns” we say we should obtain before returning.’

He replaced his hat and smiled, as if he had just been talking about the weather. ‘So I had to stay longer in Ballarat, long enough to finance my next move. And this is it: Tasmania. Maybe the gods prefer me to be rich through mining tin, not gold. The Sek Lung Mining Company ...’

‘Sek Lung? I was recruited in Canton to work for that company!’

‘You too? How fortunate. Do you know what Sek Lung means in English?’

‘No, I can’t speak English.’

‘You should learn. It means “Tin Dragon”. Yes, Sek Lung is owned by Lee Meng Hon. He formed the Sek Lung Mining Company to work the area around Emu Flat. His nose is sensitive to the fragrance of a business about to ripen. It is good to work for a man like that.’

Charlie clapped his hand on Ah Yan’s upper arm. ‘So, Little Brother, you too are contracted to him. Wonderful! We miners usually work in pairs. Will you work with me? I’m sure we would work well together, you and I.’

‘Oh yes!’ Ah Yan placed his arms around Charlie and hugged him, as one would an Older Brother.

Happy though the prospect of working with Charlie made him feel, Ah Yan was disturbed by what he had just been told. He could feel Charlie’s pain while he was talking in that soft voice of his, his physical agony in having his hair pulled out,

the humiliation of being pissed on by white devils, and especially his mental agony when his expectations of being reunited with his family, the hero's return, were so rudely dashed. Instead, he had to start all over again. Ah Yan wondered how he would have coped with all that. Not well, he thought.

'But this hatred of us Chinese,' Ah Yan asked nervously, 'surely things will be no different in Tasmania?'

'I think they will be different. Naughty children will no doubt call out "Ching-chong-Chinaman" as we walk along the street, but the kind of violence that happened in Ballarat occurred because we worked harder and made more money than they did. The white devils didn't like that. But in Tasmania we won't be competing with them. Panning for tin in river beds is too much like hard work for Europeans, so they leave it to us. They prefer to sit back and watch machines crush the ore from rock.'

Ah Yan nodded, a little happier.

'We are coming to Tasmania at exactly the right time, Ah Yan. Have no fear. My luck must turn, and as long as you are with me, my good fortune shall be your good fortune. Now Ah Yan, what about you? What's your story?'

Ah Yan's story? Why was he walking into this unknown world? Would Tasmanian earth yield him riches or scorpions? That was a question he could not answer. But at least he knew why he had left China.

'I had no choice but to leave China. I lost my family in the troubles following the Tai Ping Rebellion. Those bloody Hairy Thieves ...'

'Ha! Like that bastard, ah?' Charlie nodded to the Hakka, who now appeared to be needling another young Chinese on the other side of the deck.

Ah Yan looked hard at the Hakka, as if he was trying to decide something but shrugged. 'Yes, those topknots ...' He turned back to Charlie. 'The Hairy Thieves attacked my village. Terrible things happened ...' Ah Yan choked, returning again to the visions that ambushed him still in his nightmares. 'So terrible, yet I can't remember clearly ...' He looked away. 'Except that Mother, Father, Older Sister, all were killed ...'

Charlie laid his hand gently on Ah Yan's shoulder. Ah Yan paused to choke back a sob, a tear trickling down his cheek. He then continued.

'After that catastrophe, at the age of six, I was left totally alone. I walked many *li* to the village of Lo Tsing where my uncle lived. He sheltered me and brought me up. When I was eighteen, he said to me: "I can do no more for you, Ah Yan. You are now old enough to look after yourself, but not I suggest here in China. You must emigrate." He brushed aside my objections. "Yes, yes, I know it is illegal, and I know you have no money. But listen. I have a friend in Canton, Wong Siu Fat. He is an agent for a man in Australia, Lee Meng Hon, who needs men for mining tin. It is easy work, anyone can do it." Uncle explained how Mr. Lee would buy tin from me less interest, expenses and what he called tribute. He would pay back Mr. Wong, also with interest, Uncle explained. "After paying your debts, you will still have enough to live on and even save a little, if you do not gamble too much," he assured me. "Many people are leaving China; the thrifty ones and the lucky ones return with riches for their families. That is what you must do. Go now.'

'So here I am, Charlie. But I do not intend to return to China; I have no family to return to, except my uncle. He was kind to me but he is old. He was glad to see me leave at the beginning of my manhood and I have no wish to see him wither at the end of his. My destiny now lies in Tasmania, Charlie.

'It cannot lie elsewhere.'

3

The ketch *Coronella* traded between Launceston and Boobyalla on the North-East Coast, carrying stores on the outward journey, bags of tin ore on the homeward, and passengers on both. Most of the passengers in the *Sorell*, including Ah Yan and Charlie, would be boarding the *Coronella* to take them to Boobyalla from whence, as tin miners contracted under the tribute system, they would walk to the various mines at which they had been employed.

It would be several hours before the *Coronella* was loaded and the tide right, so to fill in the time Charlie and Ah Yan walked from the docks to the great modern city of Launceston.

‘Wah, it might be smaller than Canton,’ Ah Yan exclaimed looking around him, ‘but so many magnificent stone buildings! And statues. And look, Charlie, along that street. Such clean, prettily painted houses, such delicate ironwork!’

‘It is more impressive than Ballarat, I have to admit,’ the world-weary Charlie replied.

The far end of the main road, Brisbane Street, led them to an exciting walk along Cataract Gorge, the narrow path clinging to the wall of a cliff, a wild river rushing only a couple of yards below their feet. At the other end of Brisbane Street was a splendid park, guarded by an elaborate fence and a large cannon mounted on huge wheels. Ah Yan and Charlie strolled through the gardens admiring the carefully tended flowers and trees, the carved fountains and little ornamental temples. The bottom end struck them less prettily. Behind a fence, two huge birds strutted up and down, their eyes evil and staring. A foul stench hung in the air like a mouldering fart.

‘Ugh, let’s move on. Those birds smell.’

‘It’s not the birds!’ Charlie laughed at Ah Yan’s ignorance. ‘They are emus. I saw many in the Ballarat goldfields. Our mine, Sek Lung, is in a place named after these birds: it is called Emu Flat. No, that smell comes from the gasworks. See?’ He pointed across the street, behind the birds’ enclosure, to a large brick building with an exceedingly tall chimney. ‘That’s the gasworks. They make gas there for lighting and heating.’

‘Wah, so we’ll have gas to keep us warm in Emu Flat! How lucky.’

‘Oh, I doubt that very much,’ Charlie smiled. ‘Now, I need to make a couple of purchases.’

‘What do you need that you can’t buy in Emu Flat?’

‘I want a good pair of waterproof knee-boots, you won’t be able to buy them in Emu Flat. We’ll be wading in cold water for a long time. You should get a pair too. Tell me, how much money do you have?’

‘I have,’ Ah Yan held out the money he had brought from China, ‘whatever that is in Australian money. I have no idea.’

‘Let’s see. Hmmm, about five pounds and ten shillings – not very much. But if you spent ten shillings, even more, on a stout pair of boots now, and you need some money later, you could sell them at a profit. They’d probably fetch a pound or more in Emu Flat,’ Charlie grinned.

More than forty men boarded the *Coronella*—including the Hakka, Ah Yan noted with a swift surge in his guts. He had been thinking about that encounter on the *Sorell*. Could that Hakka have been involved in sacking his village; could he even be the one who did those terrible things all those years ago? Ah Yan wasn’t sure. Perhaps, he thought, it mattered not. Each Hairy Thief was as bad as the next. All deserved to die. But Ah Yan knew that conducting a crusade of killing Hakkas was not a good way to start his new life in this land. He desperately hoped that the bastard was not contracted to Mr. Lee! Seeing that vile animal again would drive him to do something that would surely bring about disaster. The *Coronella* was small and cramped, the journey slow and uncomfortable, but Ah Yan managed to avoid confronting the creature.

Early on Thursday morning, the *Coronella* passed through narrow heads then entered the broad mouth of the Boobyalla River before tying up at the wharf at Port Boobyalla. Ah Yan stood on the deck with Charlie. After all his high expectations, he voiced his disappointment. ‘*Aiyaaa*. Look at that, Charlie, just look at that.’

The long wharf led to a cluster of large sheds, beyond which was the town itself, comprising buildings hastily constructed to serve the needs of the frenzy

caused by tin mining. An ordinary enough sight, to be sure, but under a sky the colour of lead, the dreary low clouds looking like they only needed a push to yield their moisture, the Boobyalla River struggling inland like a dark and turgid sewer, it was a sight that gave Ah Yan no cheer. Beyond the concentrated busyness around the wharf itself, mean looking trees, low and tangled, lined the shores of the broad bay, while beyond the heads he could see the long sandy beach extending endlessly to the north-east. As Ah Yan looked inland, he saw a dull, dark-green carpet of untidy bush unrolling until it was stopped by large mountains jumping out of the evil looking mess. A dreary and sinister landscape, Ah Yan thought. And somewhere beyond it lay Emu Flat, his future workplace and home.

‘*Aiyaaa,*’ he repeated. ‘I have been ship-bound for weeks, months, since leaving Canton. I am unused to walking, unused to anything except building dreams, escaping nightmares and eating bad food. And now we have to walk through *that?*’

But Charlie smiled as he looked inland, nodding his answer to Ah Yan’s desperate question. ‘Yes, Ah Yan, we do. But it’s not nearly as bad as it looks, believe me.’

They filed ashore and gathered on the beach, where a large train of massive bullocks stood patiently at the head of a huge waggon. Europeans were in charge of unloading the waggon, which was stacked with countless sacks of tin ore. The new arrivals were ordered to assist in carrying these sacks one at a time, and place them in the ship’s hold—as if they were coolies not miners. It was hard work. The sacks were heavy, weighing around one hundredweight each. Ah Yan and his companions staggered between waggon and ship for several hours.

That finished, they were herded into line by a Chinese wearing a waistcoat as if it was a robe of office, to let the once-coolies now-miners know that he was their superior. He paced up and down, waving his arms, as he called harshly in Cantonese.

‘You will all now walk to your destinations. It will take about half a day for those working at Mount Cameron, a day or more for the rest of you. I hope you have brought sufficient food!’ He smirked, as if he hoped they had not. As indeed Ah Yan

had not. He was relieved when Charlie whispered to him that he had pocketed some dried beef and hardtack from the ship.

The walk was just as bad as Ah Yan had thought it would be, his muscles now aching from carrying the heavy tin ore. Ah Yan trudged behind Charlie, following the bullock trail that had brought the tin ore from the mines to the wharves at Boobyalla. It rained, heavily at times. Sometimes they sank to their knees in deep puddles. Ah Yan blessed Charlie for suggesting those boots—they at least kept his feet dry.

They walked in single file, some carrying their belongings in hessian bags slung over their shoulders, others carrying large baskets slung at the ends of a pole. To prevent the pole bouncing on their shoulders, they glided in a sort of trot that allowed the pole bearers, despite their burden, to move faster than the plodders. Periodically, the pole bearers stopped and waited for the others to catch up, shouting: ‘Tortoises!’ ‘Turtle’s eggs!’ This was very insulting, but Ah Yan at least was too tired and too sore to care. Five men left the group at the Mount Cameron turn-off. A few miles further on, the rest stretched out under the trees, under whatever shelter they could fashion from bark, branches and large fern leaves.

The next day, more men left them as they arrived at the turn-offs for the mines at Garibaldi and Branxholm. But still not that cursed Hakka, Ah Yan noted anxiously. The repulsive gnome had fastened himself onto that young man he had been talking to on the *Sorell*. Ah Yan guessed that the young fellow must have been a Hakka too, for the older man was jabbering incessantly in that unpleasant and incomprehensible dialect. The only thing Ah Yan could decipher was that the young man was called Ah Fung. To Ah Yan’s immense relief, the two Hakkas turned out of line at Krushka’s Bridge, where the Moorina mines were.

At the turn-off, the older Hakka stopped and turned, his eyes resting for a moment on Ah Yan. Ah Yan saw, with the shock of certainty, the same wicked sneer in the sunken slits he’d seen fourteen years ago. *It was him*. By the time Ah Yan had recovered, the other had vanished.

They walked, or in Ah Yan's case staggered, into Emu Flat in the afternoon of the second day. He was right. He had been unfit for a twenty-mile journey through such rough terrain, the track along which he'd stumbled frequently snagged with tree roots and hemmed in by walls of thick bush and huge old trees. Ah Yan was hungry, tired to the point of collapse, his feet blistered and bleeding.

When he saw who was there to meet them, he wondered if what lay ahead of them would be any better than that long hungry march. At least, he concluded, it could hardly be any worse.

4

Of the twelve men remaining, nine were destined for the Sek Lung mine in Emu Flat, the three others continued on to the Wheel of Fortune mine over the next rise. Jack and his eight companions were met by a fussy cock-sparrow of a man. He sported a neatly trimmed moustache and was dressed in a suit and waistcoat even though the afternoon sun was warm. Behind him stood a huge man with a bald head and a face as forgiving as that of a granite cliff. His massive arms were folded across a chest a prize-fighter would be proud of.

The smaller man forced the newcomers to stand while he paced backwards and forwards, like a military officer assessing the new recruits, from time to time looking sharply into the face of each, as if expecting to find something there deserving of punishment. Ah Yan struggled to remain upright. His dearest wish was to sink to the ground and sleep the sleep of the dead. No, that was his second dearest wish. The first was to eat something hot and filling. A large bowl of fish congee floated before his mind's eye.

Apparently satisfied for the time being, the martinet suddenly addressed the men. 'Now!' he shouted in English. Although only nine men were standing not two yards away, his voice was a high silver spear that could have impaled a multitude. 'I am your manager. My name is Tsang Pik Fai, but here I am known as Simon Ah Fai. Your names, please. *You,*' he pointed at Ah Yan at the end of the line.

Swaying with tiredness, Ah Yan was at a loss. He elbowed Charlie beside him, his eyes framing a tortured question.

'Your *name,*' Charlie mouthed.

Ah Yan managed to bow low, palms pressed together. '*Ngor giu Tang Wing Yan, Lo Ban.*'

'Boss! Not *Lo Ban.* Call me Boss or Mr. Ah Fai, more better,' Ah Fai ordered, still using English.

Ah Yan knew that very few apart from Charlie would have understood what Mr. Ah Fai was saying; he certainly did not. What he did understand was that he

should learn English as quickly as he could—and that he did not like this Mr. Ah Fai at all.

Ah Fai turned to the others, thrusting his spear, the sharper now for being only in Cantonese—the little bastard had made his cheap point, Ah Yan supposed. Ah Fai checked the names of the other newcomers on a list he was carrying. That concluded, he indicated the giant standing behind him.

‘This man here is Big Chan, “Big” in English, see. *Dai*. He ensures discipline is maintained. Do not cross him!’

Big Chan bared his teeth in a theatrical gesture Ah Yan thought childish, not in the least terrifying.

Ah Fai resumed. ‘We are living in a barbarian country and the barbarians do not understand us. They do not like it when we speak our tongue, when we dress as civilised people should dress, and eat in the way we are accustomed to eat. Therefore you should learn English. But,’ he sighed, as if contemplating the stupidity of his audience, ‘I’ll wager few of you shall. At the very least you should become known by names they will understand. Choose an English first name. You, Lam, you are called Charlie, *ha?* If you others do not have your name ready, with an English first name, they will give you one, like Bobby. Or Montmorency,’ he sniggered, pausing for a laugh that did not come. ‘I know that makes no sense to us, but that is their way. Think about what name you want to use. Inform me when you have decided.’

He turned, indicating the camp with a flamboyant gesture that the ramshackle collection of huts hardly deserved.

‘Now to your accommodation. You can build your own hut, but that will take time. Meanwhile, two huts are available, for which the Company will require rent if you choose to occupy them. One hut has been left by men who have since returned to China. The other was built by a miner, Robert Ah Foy. His is a sad tale that illustrates an important point.’

The tired and hungry men shuffled. Ah Fai seemed to sense he was losing them. He raised his voice. ‘That point *killed* him!’

Ah Yan looked at the other men to see their expressions change suddenly. They were shuffling now from apprehension. Ah Fai's expression also changed: Ah Yan could see he was enjoying himself now he had seized the men's attention.

'Yes, killed him. And what is that point? This is the point. Women with pointy noses and round eyes mean *trouble!* This Robert Ah Foy fell in love with such a woman. They married. But she refused to live here in Emu Flat with him. She lived instead in Derby with her mother while Robert lived and worked here. Robert was a hard worker; Sek Lung was kind to him. He earned a lot of money, as can you too if you work hard.'

He paused, letting this piece of self-serving wisdom sink in.

'So every weekend Robert walked the seventeen miles to Derby to be with his beloved. This he did with a glad heart. But then, one day he arrived when she was not expecting him.' Ah Fai looked meaningfully at the men who were now hanging on his every word. 'She was in the very act of *copulating* with another man. A foreign devil.'

He had them now. 'What did Robert do?' someone called out.

Ah Fai smiled thinly. 'He stuffed five one pound notes in her mouth then stabbed her to death!'

'What happened to him?' Charlie asked.

'Her mother came into the room next morning and found Robert lying on top of her daughter—and his wife. He too had been stabbed between the ribs!'

'Then how ...?' one man asked.

'The mother killed him!' another shouted.

'The other man killed him them both!'

Ah Fai shook his head slowly, smiling as if he was himself the devil who had created this horror. 'Not the mother. She was in a drunken stupor all night. Not the other man. The police think Robert would have waited until he had left, otherwise Robert would have killed him as well as his wife. Therefore they conclude he must have killed her first then placed the knife in her hand and fallen on her, mocking the position of love.'

Ah Fai then broke into a cunning leer. He held an extended forefinger beside his face. 'But the police didn't work out the full story. I have. Why were the five pound notes in her mouth? Eh?' He paused for effect. 'Let me tell you why. Insatiable in his rage, he ordered her to service him five times, for that is the position in which they were found. Each time Robert paid her with a pound note. As her hands were otherwise engaged, he placed the money in her mouth. Only *then* did he slay her.'

Mr. Ah Fai drew himself erect, and wagged his finger at the gaping men. 'So, you see, it is very unlucky for a Chinese man to have sex with a *gwaipor*. Do not do it—it will drive you mad, as it drove Robert mad. Now, who of you would like to live in Robert Ah Foy's house?'

Again the men shuffled uncomfortably, fear on their faces. No one said a word.

Ah Fai looked irritated. 'Very well, I make an offer, special for you. You take it, you pay no rent. *Ha?*'

'We will take it,' Ah Yan said quickly. He added quietly to Charlie beside him, 'I'm not afraid of foreign demons—or of Chinese ones either. All the evils I have seen were carried out by evil men. I have never seen evil-doing by a ghost. Never!'

Charlie stiffened, looking at his friend with wide eyes. He seemed not to believe what he had heard.

Ah Yan whispered. 'Listen, Charlie, just listen! We shall have a hut that only we two share—and for which we pay nothing! The others will be very crowded in that other hut. It is stupid to be afraid. Would you not live in a house after the previous owner had died? Of course you would. This is the same.'

Charlie groaned. He was unconvinced.

5

Robert Ah Foy had gone to some pains to prepare the hut intended for his treacherous wife. At one end he had built a bedroom with a large comfortable bed; at the other end, a proper fireplace and chimney. In most huts, a low fire burned in the middle of the floor, the smoke escaping through gaps in the roof. A European woman, working at home all day, would not like to work in so much smoke, so Robert had built a chimney for her. The floor was dirt, to be sure, but it was packed so hard it swept as clean as if they were floorboards. Robert had built shelves on which he had placed bottles still filled with flowers, but the flowers were now dried, withered with sadness.

‘Look around you! If his spirit still lives here,’ Ah Yan lowered his voice, ‘and I don’t know if it does or not, but allowing that it does, it would be a grey and sad spirit, not a dangerous one. I am determined to give cheer to the poor ghost by making this a happy place, as Robert intended. For a start, I shall find some wildflowers to replace these he intended for his wife.’

‘But ...’ Charlie started.

‘Charlie, if we keep this house the way Ah Robert would have liked it—cheerful and busy—his spirit will rest more peacefully.’

‘If that means his ghost will leave us alone, by all means. But I doubt that. I feel uneasy here.’

‘No need, Charlie, no need. Ah Robert was good and kind. You can see it in the little touches here he made for his wife. His ghost will be like him, kind and honest too. It won’t harm us.’

‘His mightn’t, but what about *her* ghost? You haven’t thought of that, now, have you?’ Charlie demanded.

‘Charlie, she didn’t ever live here. Anyway,’ Ah Yan laughed at the unlikely thought, ‘why should a *gwaipor*’s ghost want to harm us? We’ve never played the fool with *gwaipors*! Perhaps we’d better make sure we never do.’

But Charlie was not laughing. He looked even more worried.

Ah Yan was both puzzled and irritated. 'So you've done it with a European lady, have you Charlie?'

'A commercial transaction only,' Charlie retorted, 'and it certainly didn't drive *me* mad, as that fool Ah Fai said. But you, Ah Yan, surely when you are alone for long periods, your imagination heats up... Surely, you have felt such urges?'

'I have felt urges ... but not for white women.' Ah Yan didn't allow his hesitation to show. He appreciated a pretty face certainly, but *beyond*? When he thought about what lay underneath a girl's garments, a cold black wind rushed into his mind, freezing all thought, all desire. He too started to feel afraid. Not of living in Robert's house, but of something else; something to do with that Hakka and Older Sister. He told himself that if Charlie could overcome his fear of ghosts, he could surely deal with his fear of ... of what? If only he could say just what! But he couldn't, and so the fear remained, invisible and paralyzing. He trusted Charlie, apart from his silly superstitions. He thought that perhaps they could help each other overcome their fears. Somehow it was now even more important to Ah Yan that he and Charlie live in this house.

'There must be a Joss House in Thomas Plains,' Ah Yan said. 'Let's go there and ask the *tseem* to tell us if it is safe for us to live here. If they say it is, would you feel comfortable living in this house?'

Charlie sat down heavily, but as a superstitious man he had no choice but to agree. 'Yes, if the message is clear. So, Little Brother, does this mean that you too are worried too?'

'Not if the sticks give us their blessing.' Ah Yan vowed to see that they would, whatever they said.

From the outside, the Joss House looked like any house with a large verandah, except for a large wooden arch standing front of it, but on entering by the side door, Ah Yan felt like he had just stepped into the temple in his uncle's village of Lo Tsing. A monk in yellow robes emerged from behind the altar where the statue of the god Kwan Ti, god of war and justice, was seated.

Master Mou was known to be a good man, but he radiated an air of sadness. He lived alone in a small room behind the Joss House and, other than performing his spiritual tasks, he kept to himself. It was said Master Mou had been a gold miner, named George, but nobody knew his real story. He had appeared in Thomas Plains ten years ago soon after tin had been discovered. Then he had disappeared after a year or so, returning some months later as a Buddhist monk. That was how the story went, but no one remained in the camp from those times to verify it. These days, he acted as spiritual leader for those who sought such guidance, conducting those ceremonies most Chinese believed essential when entering this life, when continuing it, and when finally leaving it.

Charlie placed some coins in a bowl and picked up the *tseem tung*, a cylindrical container of numbered sticks. He knelt facing the god Kwan Ti and shook the *tung*—*klok klok klok klok*—until a *tseem* sprang out. He picked it up and gave it to Master Mou.

‘Number Seven, Master.’

Master Mou turned to a scroll. ‘Number Seven, Number Seven ... ah yes, here.’

He spoke Cantonese with a Northern accent, as befitted his looks: he was taller even than Ah Yan. He unwound the scroll and read silently. He looked up, his sad eyes reminding Ah Yan of those of a dying dog. ‘What is your question?’

The Master’s eyes became progressively sadder as Charlie spoke.

‘We are wondering if it is safe to live in the house of a man who murdered his wife, then killed himself. She was a European lady. I beg the god Kwan Ti’s favour, b-but I have to say that in the past I myself have, er, had sex with a European woman ...’

‘But I have not,’ Ah Yan interrupted. The Master frowned at him.

‘Master, I am fearful,’ Charlie continued, ‘lest the ghost of the murdered lady punish me for that. Could that be so?’

‘Making love with a European woman is surely fraught with unhappiness,’ the Master replied, his eyes glistening.

He's nearly weeping! Ah Yan realised with surprise. Ah Yan was touched. He had thought that monks of all people would not display emotion, especially an emotion relating to the temptations of the flesh. Master Mou turned his head to one side, as if he was indeed concealing tears.

Charlie whispered to Ah Yan, 'See, Little Brother, I was right ...'

But the Master recovered. Looking directly at them, he replied briskly. 'But that is not your present business. The answer to your question is contained in what the scroll says.

*"Reject what the god offers thee
And thou shalt suffer calamity."*

That is Kwan Ti's answer to your question.'

'But Master, will the calamity occur if we do live there, or if we do not live there?' Charlie asked anxiously.

The Master repeated the couplet. 'That is all. The god Kwan Ti has spoken. Now that matter is concluded, pray tell me. Did the house in question belong to Robert ...'

'Yes, Robert Ah Foy!' Ah Yan interrupted. 'But I don't know the name of his wife.'

Master Mou looked more sorrowful than ever. 'That I can tell you,' said he. 'Her name was ... Lucy. You need not fear her ghost.'

He stared at the two men, his lips compressed, his chin quivering, a glistening flow dropping from each of his large, dark eyes.

6

The visit to Master Mou had allayed Charlie's fears, but he and Ah Yan were sorely puzzled as to the reason for the Master's grief. He had known the name of Robert's wife, yet she had been a *gwaipor*! How could that be? They would never know, for the Master was not the sort of man who would entertain questions of a personal nature. The important thing was that they had the answer to Charlie's question.

The Company had removed most of Robert's personal possessions, leaving some tools and cooking implements. Charlie, his mind now at rest, set to making Robert's former house more suited to two bachelors. He found an axe under the bed, in perfect condition apart from some rust.

'Aha!' said he, 'just what we need. First thing is to grind a decent edge to this blade. I can then make an extra bed, a chair or two, whatever else you suggest, Ah Yan. Easy.'

'I know nothing of carpentry, Charlie. You show me how. But yes, an extra bed would be excellent.'

But the first thing Charlie built was a small shelf above the end of the bed. He rummaged in his pocket and produced a little doll, about three inches long. It was a little boy doll, with two tufts of hair sprouting from his shaven head, clothed in traditional dress.

Charlie placed it on the shelf, stood back, and bowed to it. 'Just before I left China, Ah Yan, my son was born. I bought this doll on that very day. I carry it around with me, to remind me—not that I need reminding—that my son is awaiting my return. I shall have this doll with me for as long as I remain in Australia.' While he talked, Charlie kept swallowing some words, making it hard for Ah Yan to hear what he was saying.

Ah Yan knew nothing of such familial emotions. He was at a loss for what to say so he asked the obvious, forgetting he had already been told on the boat. 'What is your son's name?'

‘Lam Sing Ping. Ah Ping, whom I don’t even know. Now, Ah Yan,’ he spoke briskly, forcing a smile, ‘talking of names you must decide your English name. I retained Lam as my family name, but instead of “Ah Chiu” I chose Charlie because it sounds a little like Chiu. So here I am, Charlie Lam at your service.’ He bowed elaborately. ‘No “Ah” in my name, like Mr. Ah Fai’s name. That is so stupid, like calling you “Mister Mister” in English. Now, Ah Yan, what will you call yourself?’

‘I want to change my name to celebrate that from now on I am Australian. I shall not return to China. So I’ll take a name in like manner as the devils themselves. My last name becomes my family name. Yan.’

‘Yang sounds better, Ah Yan.’

‘Yang, then. What might be a good first name, Charlie?’

‘Many Australians are called “Jack”. Yes,’ Charlie sounded the name several times, “Jack Yang”. I like it, Jack Yang.’

‘Very well, here I am. Jack Yang, at your service.’

Jack bowed in turn.

Jack Yang quickly learned what a tin miner had to do. The tin ore, called cassiterite, had to be separated from the dirt and mullock in which it was embedded. The process was much like panning for gold. A long wooden water race poured water directly onto a sluice box, into which the men shovelled river mud. They stood at the sluice with their pans and yandied this slurry by swirling it around until the heavy grains of cassiterite remained at the bottom of the pan. The cassiterite was bagged and transported by horse or bullock waggon to Boobyalla for shipment to Launceston, where the metallic tin would be extracted from the grey-black mess. These were the bags Jack and the others had helped to load when they landed at Boobyalla.

Sek Lung paid forty shillings a bag, less the fifteen per cent ‘tribute’ for the right to work on the Company’s lease, less repayment of any debt to the Company. In Jack’s case, this was considerable, involving his debt to Mr. Wong in Canton and his debt to Sek Lung for his passage from Canton to Boobyalla, but at least he and

Charlie were living rent free. At this rate, Jack calculated that it might take three years to clear his debt before he started making real money. But it was hard to calculate a precise estimate of when that might be because Jack's net per bag varied in a way he found difficult to understand. Recently, he had been clearing rather less than one pound a week to live on.

It took a long time to obtain only a small amount of ore. Part of the reason was that the Company required the miners to pass magnets over the precipitate from time to time to confirm that it was tin, not wolfram, which looked similar. Tin adhered to the magnet, whereas wolfram did not. Jack resented the lack of trust this requirement displayed and felt that the magnet procedure was simply a waste of precious time—all checks to date had confirmed the presence only of tin.

The work was backbreaking, the discomfort worse when the sun was hot. They wore large straw hats and long sleeves to protect their arms. Charlie was used to the heat and all that bending while yandying the large pan, heavy with water and mud. He remained cheerfully unaffected by the toil, but alas Jack did not. The first two weeks or so were hell for him. He staggered back to the hut scarcely able to move, leaving Charlie to cook the evening meal. It was clear to him why the Europeans were happy to leave the extraction of alluvial tin to the Chinese. In any case, the richest lodes of ore were embedded within the rocks themselves. It required massive stamp batteries to crush the rocks, as at the Anchor Mine at Lottah, or powerful jets of water as at the Briseis Mine at Derby. The Europeans discouraged Chinese from working at these mines but were happy to let them do all the dirty work on the river flats. Thus did the two communities remain at peace with each other.

Gradually Jack became accustomed to the unusually demanding work. After those first dismal weeks, his biceps swelled and his stomach became flat and hard. Jack felt lithe and strong, better than he had felt for many years. After paying his dues to Sek Lung and buying provisions, Jack usually had a little left, which like most of the others he gambled away at the fan tan hall. He enjoyed losing his money at first, but when he started losing more than he was able to save each week, he took pause, remembering his uncle's counsel. He asked himself a simple question, to

whit: Why am I throwing my hard earned money away? This was a question to which there was only one answer, but it must have been spoken softly. Most of his compatriots seemed not to hear it.

Ah Jing and Ah Kai, two fellow miners, preferred to spend whatever spare money they had on something tangible, even if they pissed it all out again before going to bed. They asked Jack to join them on Friday and Saturday nights to drink ale at the new hotel, the All Nations. Beer drinking was definitely a white man's pastime so, certain that he would end his days in Tasmania, Jack decided to join them and do what the white men did. He reasoned that the quicker he learned English, and learned not to be afraid of the white devils, even to become friends with them—if such a thing was possible—the better it would be.

Ah Kai, small but built like a weightlifter, was trying to learn English. Ah Jing, who already spoke good English, was smooth and business-like, with sharp, intelligent eyes. If Jack joined them in the hotel, Ah Jing assured Jack he would translate for him until he could hold his own in English conversation. Like Charlie, they used English names that sounded like their real names: Jing became 'Jim', which the Australians turned to Jimmy, and Kai became 'Guy', which was almost the same sound.

They asked Charlie to join them too, but he said he only drank *mai jau*, a rice wine he bought from Ah Gee's little store at Emu Flat. Besides, he preferred to smoke opium with some of the older miners after a hard day's work. Jack tried it, but found that opium made him feel too sleepy.

He preferred to be like the Australian men and drink ale.

7

The first time Jack had entered the bar of the All Nations Hotel he had been nervous about meeting Europeans face to face, after all the horror stories he had heard. The large room had a low ceiling that trapped tobacco smoke in layers so harsh it made Jack feel like his throat had been cut. Groups of white devils—and some of them really did look like devils—stood at the bar or sat at tables, eating, drinking and talking.

An older man—the most devilish looking of all, with his red face, untidy white beard and pale blue eyes—had looked up at Jack, the man's harsh gaze settling on him like fine itching powder. The man had then turned to Jimmy, asking him something in a loud, gruff voice as if stones were rattling in his throat.

Jimmy had started to reply 'Jack ...'

Ha, Jack had thought, this fearsome looking devil is only asking my name.

'Jack Yang, Sir,' Jack had interrupted eagerly, finishing Jimmy's sentence, proud to have understood and to have had his English name ready.

But he had spoiled it, as Jimmy later told him, by bowing, his hands pressed together in front of him.

The man had replied as if he really was angry: 'Me name's 'Arry, not fuckin' Sir, and none of that kowtow bullshit here. Don'tcha know the name of this here hotel? All Fuckin' Nations, mate, and that includes you.' He then reached out his hand, taking Jack's fingers in his fist, crunching them. Jack had winced with pain, but chose to assume it was an act of greeting not one of aggression.

To Jack's surprise, Harry then broke into a broad grin, waving his hand to a group of men standing nearby.

'This here's Joe.' A thin wisp of a man, with a bald head and staring eyes, had smiled with a wide mouth showing many gaps in his teeth, but he did not offer to crunch Jack's hand. Neither did Fred, a tall, athletic looking man with a trim moustache, a waistcoat and neat bow-tie. He too had smiled widely, revealing teeth filled with gold. He raised his glass in greeting.

The three Europeans then resumed their own conversation, leaving the Chinese to their own devices. Whereupon Jimmy had steered Jack and Guy further down the bar. He had assured Jack there was nothing at all to worry about, explaining the rituals of meeting and hand-shaking. Jimmy ordered a pitcher of dark yellow drink, foaming like the Weld River in flood. He handed Jack a glass.

‘*Yik*, so bitter!’ Jack exclaimed, pulling a face. He looked up to see Harry’s group laughing at him. Joe, showing more gaps than teeth, lifted his own glass high.

‘You’ll like it in time, and it makes you feel good. Better than rice wine!’ Guy laughed.

Guy had been so right! By the end of the evening, and several pitchers later, Jack was liking it very much. The three friends had walked back to Emu Flat laughing and singing old Cantonese songs from childhood, stopping to piss in the bushes by the roadside.

Twice.

There was a stranger in the bar. Guy explained that he was a travelling salesman, Mr. Todd Purvis. He stopped at the All Nations about twice a year on his way to Georges Bay in his expensive pony trap with its shiny, black roof. Mr. Purvis was dressed in dark trousers and a thick, long coat made of large, square, black and yellow patches. His shirt had a high, starched wing collar, in the cleft of which was a red and yellow spotted bow tie. But the most outstanding feature was his brown moustache. It was carefully trimmed, twisted and waxed at the ends. The moustache extended beyond the width of his face, almost to that of his shoulders. Purvis’s face looked like a cat’s, his moustache the whiskers to test the width of whatever doorway he wished to enter. His long, glowing sausage of a nose lay above this strange facial adornment, his eyes peeping out like blackcurrants on either side of the sausage.

‘He’s as funny as he looks,’ Guy said. ‘Harry and the others like him very much. He brings things you usually can’t buy here—funny pictures, pens that have their own ink supply, clockwork toys that do strange things ... *wah!*’ He threw up his arms by way of finishing his sentence.

There was a roar of laughter from further up the bar. The publican, Mr. Albert Taylor, dressed as usual in a white shirt with rolled up sleeves, and a weskit, the bottom buttons of which were left undone to allow his fat belly its space, was holding something curious to his face. It was like a mask, with a picture-frame set in on a slider. Mr. Taylor placed a photograph in the frame and fiddled with a knob on the slider. He boomed: 'What a smasher! Where'd you get these, Todd?'

'Fell off a brewer's dray, Bertie. Try this 'un!' Purvis took another photograph from a box, exchanging it for the one in the slider.

'Cor luv-a-duck, don't show this to the missus!'

Taylor guffawed, and passed the instrument to another man at the bar, who howled with delight.

Purvis had a large Gladstone bag full of items. The men rummaged inside, holding up different objects, shouting: 'Hey, Todd, 'ow much for this?', 'ow about this'n, eh?'

This noisy spectacle went on for some time, while the three Chinese drank and chatted, not particularly interested in white men's toys. After a while, the din quietened down and Purvis sidled up to Jack's group.

'Well, me lads,' he beamed at each in turn, man to man, slapping Jimmy on the shoulder, 'interested in anything?'

Jack was curious to know what Mr. Taylor had been looking at. He asked Jimmy to ask about the thing in which Mr. Purvis placed photographs.

'This? This 'ere is what is known as a stereoscope. With this marvellous invention, you may see pictures in three dimensions like you see as per normal with your very own eyes. Now see here,' he picked up a photograph of a scene, 'this 'ere's Cataract Gorge, no less, in our fair city of Launceston. Well, as you may readily perceive, there are two photographs on this mount. They look much alike, do they not? How very singular, you may say. But you would be wrong—for, as I have just this moment remarked, have I not, that there are *two* photographs. Ha ha! Why two, you may well ask? I shall tell you why. One is for the right eye, and one is for the left.'

He held the instrument up to Jack's face. Jimmy translated. 'Focus with this knob here, Jack ...'

Jack gasped as he saw the very spot where he and Charlie had been walking. They had looked down onto the river from this footpath, thinking how easy it would be to fall over! Looking at the picture, Jack nearly lurched off balance as if he was truly back there and about to fall.

'Now, good young Sir, pray try these.' Mr. Purvis winked, his lips slippery with cunning. He picked up some more pictures and placed one in the holder.

It was a picture of a pretty young woman, a *gwaipor* with fluffy dark hair, sitting on a stool in front of a large mirror. She was dressed in a lacy gown that was unbuttoned, her shoulders bare. One of her breasts was clearly visible. It was so real Jack felt he could take her breast in the palm of his hand, if he dared to. His initial interest in the instrument leapt to panic proportions. His stomach rolled as if he might vomit.

'Like her? Well, my young friend, you ain't seen nothin' yet, as the saying goes.' Mr. Purvis chuckled. He removed the picture and placed another in the holder. 'A close-up, if you like, real close, let us say. And as you may also readily perceive, young Sir, it is *bath* time.'

Jacks' pounding heart pumped a rush of blood that roared in his ears. He screwed his eyes tightly shut to avert another image that was pushing at the edge of his consciousness.

8

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.'

9

A week after they had bought the scales, Jack and Charlie carried their carefully weighed bags to Simon Ah Fai's office prepared to do battle. They had shared their concerns in confidence to others of their friends; five more were eager to borrow the scales and weigh their bags too. So today, there were twelve bags to be weighed, each containing one hundredweight of cassiterite, correct to the ounce.

Jack was first in line. He placed his bag on the scales.

Ah Fai pushed weights to and fro. He read the weights in balance and reached for his abacus.

Jack too leaned across to read the weights. 'Just a minute, Mr. Ah Fai. My bag should weigh exactly one hundredweight.'

'That it does not, Yang. Look, you fool, look at these weights.' He pointed to the notched cross-bar, in balance, the small weights positioned to read—105 lbs. 'Is that one hundredweight?' Ah Fai sneered, taking a step towards Jack. 'I warned you last time. You are a troublemaker. Another squeak out of you and you are dead as far as Sek Lung is concerned.' He turned his head over his shoulder to look meaningfully at Big Chan, his huge guardian bear.

Ah Fai started calculating Jack's net return for the bag, '... oh yes, I forgot; less two and six for your share of the rent ...'

Charlie interrupted, tipping a wink to the other waiting miners with their exactly weighed bags. The room was tense. 'Try this one, Mr. Ah Fai ...'

'In good time, Lam. I haven't finished with Yang yet. Can't you see?'

In response, Charlie lifted Jack's bag off the scales, placing his own there in its stead. Before Ah Fai's astonished eyes, Charlie brought the cross bar to balance—at 105 lbs.

'Your scales are wrong, Mr. Ah Fai. My bag, and Jack's bag, and ten other bags here in this room, have already been weighed, very carefully. Each one weighs one hundredweight exactly, which I am sure you are aware is 112 lbs. Not one hundred and five but *one hundred and twelve pounds*.'

Charlie looked calm and wise as he gazed at the pulsating, sweating Ah Fai. 'It might appear that you have been cheating us, Mr. Ah Fai, but let us be fair. Can you ...'

'Liars! This is a conspiracy! You are trying to trap me!' Ah Fai screamed. He turned to Big Chan. 'Take their names, all of them, everyone here, and strike them from my register! I think Yang might benefit from ...'

Jack held up his hand. 'No, Mr. Ah Fai, I think the first step is to bring the authorities in to check your scales.' He turned to the men. 'Well, lads, what do you think? Should we ...'

'Don't you threaten me, Yang!' Ah Fai shouted. Big Chan moved forward a step.

'Oh, he is not threatening you, Sir,' Charlie said gently, waving Chan back. Chan hesitated, glancing at Ah Fai for orders but Ah Fai was now attending to Charlie, who continued. 'I assure you, he is not. But consider this. If you dismiss these miners here, production at Sek Lung will slow to a trickle. Mr. Lee would be greatly displeased. Greatly.' He smiled kindly at Ah Fai.

'So I think, Mr. Ah Fai, that it would be better if we continued this conversation in private, including Mr. Yang here, as an aggrieved party. I would also suggest a reliable witness whom we all trust.' Charlie looked enquiringly at Ah Leung, whose solid conservative presence would be a great advantage. Ah Leung nodded reluctantly, almost imperceptibly, 'Ah Leung, one of the most reliable men here.'

The three men crowded Mr. Ah Fai into his office. Without being invited, Big Chan also pushed his way into the small room. He closed the door and stood in front of it, as if he were the guardian of the gates of hell to see that no souls escaped.

Ah Fai sought to recapture his authority by sitting importantly behind his desk. He resumed the air of a stern but just boss, Lo Ban, who had called a few recalcitrant employees before him. 'Now,' he snapped. 'Explain yourselves.'

'Well, Mr. Ah Fai, are these the same scales as when we arrived, seven months ago?'

'They are.'

‘Perhaps the same as when Ah Leung here arrived, what, three years ago?’

Ah Fai’s head moved slightly.

‘I suppose we should take that as a yes,’ Charlie murmured. ‘Very well then, let us assume each man here has brought on average of, let us say, one bag per week? More or less.’

Ah Fai shrugged.

‘Ah, now let me see ...’ he reached for Ah Fai’s abacus. ‘It seems we have been short-changed by seven pounds weight per bag each week. Now, that amounts to 364 pounds per man each year. That is ...’ Charlie sent the beads clicking. ‘£6/10/- a year per man. Now, for forty men...’

‘NO!’ screamed Ah Fai. ‘The scales were fair then! Chan will tell you, he fixed them only ...’

‘Ah,’ Charlie nodded to the others, ‘but you just said yourself the scales had not been touched in three years. Therefore the scales must have been under-reading for at least three years! That’s how we see it, don’t we?’ He looked enquiringly at the other men who all nodded. ‘I am sure, Mr. Ah Fai, that the men will believe your word and ours, rather than that of Big Chan. So, as I was saying, for forty men that amounts to £260 each year for three years that you, no that Sek Lung, has withheld from us. That’s £780 in total! That’s a lot of money ...’ Charlie paused, wagging his finger reprovingly at Ah Fai. He turned, smiling reassuringly at Ah Leung who stepped back a pace, an anxious look on his face.

‘Let me be more specific, Mr. Ah Fai. Take Ah Leung here, who has been here for full three years. He would have been cheated of 1,092 pounds of tin, which at £2 per hundredweight is £19/10/- . That is the amount you owe just our good friend Ah Leung ...’

‘Mr. Ah Fai,’ Ah Leung interrupted, ‘that may be true, but I am willing to let it pass ...’

‘Ah Leung is a gentleman, Mr. Ah Fai, but I fear many of our more hot-headed colleagues would be less forgiving.’ Charlie turned to Jack. ‘How about you Jack, what do you think?’

‘I think that the men would go on strike if this daylight robbery continues,’ Jack replied immediately. ‘They would demand back payment. And they would bring in the authorities who would, I am sure, close the mine down. Mr. Lee would be most displeased, Simon, don’t you think?’

Ah Fai looked more shocked at Jack’s use of his first name than at what he had actually said.

‘What do you want, you bastard?’ Ah Fai hissed at Jack, his face thrust forward like that of tiger snake about to strike. Big Chan stepped forward but Ah Fai waved him back. ‘Later Chan, if need be.’

Ah Leung anxiously tried to smooth matters. ‘Now Jack, lad, easy does it. It would not do to stir up disharmony. We must not offend Mr. Lee, nor must we sully the name of the Sek Lung Company. To tell the men the full details of the injustice would be unwise. The consequences most unfortunate. Mr. Ah Fai would be punished, certainly, but so would we. We would have no jobs. We would all lose.’

‘Ah Leung has a point. But so then, has Jack.’ Charlie concluded. ‘You see, Mr. Ah Fai, if we called in the authorities to check your scales, as rightfully we should of course, and if they found anything amiss, you yourself would have to make good the loss ...’

‘Wh-what are you suggesting?’

‘I’ll tell you what!’ Jack stepped forward, resting his palms flat on the desk, leaning his face inches from Ah Fai’s. ‘First, you will tell the men that the scales need to be adjusted and that they are to return tomorrow to weigh their bags again and to be paid accordingly. Second, the rate per bag will be increased to forty-two shillings. I am certain you are aware that Star of Peace pay more even than that. If you refuse, many men, possibly all, will seek work at Star of Peace. Third, tomorrow, but only tomorrow, you shall pay each man a bonus of £4—only £4—which is much less than theirs by right, as any one of us here present could easily confirm.’

Jack stood erect to wind up. He had remembered Master Mou’s statement: *You are many, he is one... You need to rest when the day is done.* ‘Fourth,’ he called clearly, while Ah Fai, clutched his head groaning audibly, ‘as you know we miners

live hard. We have no place wherein we may rest, meet our comrades, hold fellowship, or where we could meet with the management of Sek Lung to see how we may work together to our mutual advantage!’ Jack paused for effect as Ah Fai looked increasingly dumbfounded. ‘Fourth, you will build the men a meeting-room.’

Ah Fai stared at him unbelievably. The striking snake had uncoiled.

‘Oh, and one more thing—no, two more things,’ Jack went on relentlessly, ‘Mr. Lam and I have a contract with you concerning our living quarters, witnessed by several of the men.’ Charlie and Ah Leung grunted their agreement. ‘So that contract still holds. We continue to pay no rent. Agreed?’

Ah Fai shrugged. ‘A small matter.’

‘The second thing is that this thug,’ he wagged his head towards Big Chan, ‘is to bully the men no longer. Doesn’t every man in this camp know the truth of Ah Wong’s “accident”? You are to dismiss Big Chan. *Sack* him, to be perfectly precise.’

Chan jerked his head in disbelief. Pulling his theatrical sneer and leering, he said in a guttural croak, as if confident of Ah Fai’s support, ‘Your arms, Yang, I’ll have your arms too, don’t you worry!’

‘Shut up, you clown,’ hissed Ah Fai, to everyone’s amazement. ‘More threats like that and these people will certainly bankrupt me—and the Company.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Ah Fai,’ Jack said. ‘I now give you the privilege of announcing the good news to the men.’

He had given face to the man he had just humiliated

The men were waiting excitedly in the weighing room for the meeting to finish. The word had flown around the camp that an extraordinary confrontation was taking place inside Ah Fai’s office between Ah Fai, and Charlie and Jack. Even the easy-going Ah Leung was said to be involved!

Suddenly, the office door burst open. Jack came out first, arms outstretched, as if embracing all his comrades at once.

‘Men,’ he shouted, ‘allow me to present the honourable Mr. Ah Fai!’ Bowing low, he waved the nonplussed Ah Fai centre stage.

The men looked at each other, muttering uneasily. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

‘Men,’ Ah Fai called. It was immediately evident that the edge of his silver spear was dulled. Faces craned forward. ‘Men,’ he repeated, ‘we have discovered that the scales are in error. I shall need to reweigh your bags. Therefore, to that end, I am requesting you to return tomorrow morning. I am also, er, pleased to tell you that there is to be a new rate of pay per bag: forty-two shillings instead of the two pounds as previously. In addition to what is due to you, for the inconvenience, I shall this once—just this once—pay each of you a bonus of four pounds ...’

His words were drowned out by a loud cheer. Jack flapped his hands, palm downwards, at the men to silence them, grinning to let them know more good news was to come.

‘Further, I have decided that since you have worked so hard and so well for the glory of Sek Lung, our beloved Company will reward you with a room wherein you may gather, take shelter when the weather is inclement, and from time to time meet with members of the Company to discuss matters to our’—he looked directly at Jack—‘to our mutual advantage ...’

Jack whispered to Ah Fai: ‘Big Chan, Mr. Ah Fai, tell them the real reason we have to reweigh the men’s bags—and what you are going to do about it.’

Ah Fai nodded, like a man on the scaffold when asked if he would like a prayer offered on his behalf. ‘Oh yes, and I regret to say that Big Chan here has fallen rather short of the standards Sek Lung expects of its employees. It was he who adjusted the scales to read less than they should. I have only now discovered this. I feel it only right and proper that I should reweigh your bags and compensate you as I have already said. And, er, I shall dismiss Big Chan. He has let us all down.’

What happened next was something that no miner at Emu Flat could ever have expected to hear.

Jack jumped on the table and shouted: ‘Three cheers for Mr. Simon Ah Fai ... hip, hip ...’

‘HOORAY!’ yelled forty voices in unison.

10

‘Well, Charlie, do you recall this very day, one year ago? I was ready to die when we finally arrived here after that terrible walk. I knew nothing about mining. I didn’t know much about anything at all, come to think of it. I owe you a lot, Older Brother.’

Jack and Charlie had finished the day’s graft and were chatting outside their hut in the late afternoon sunshine, warm for September. Jack was holding a bucket in his hand and as he spoke he bent down and splashed water over the struggling vegetables in their little garden.

‘You owe me nothing, Little Brother. It was you who thought out the details of the trap for Ah Fai, right there on the spot. You were impressive, Jack!’

‘No, Charlie, that was your doing. You calmed a very tense situation. *Aiyaa*, look at these onions.’

Charlie bent over and grunted. ‘They’ll be fine with a good drink. So shall I, in a moment. Maybe some rice wine would be just the ticket for the onions too. But honestly, Jack, it was you who won the men over. In one stroke, you placed Ah Fai centre stage as if it was all his idea. You forced him to commit to *your* agenda! Brilliant. I would never have believed he would agree to get rid of Big Chan. And the idea of a meeting hall ...’

‘Sacking Big Chan gave him a scapegoat. He must have seen the advantage in that—the men are happy and he doesn’t lose face,’ Jack reasoned. ‘As for the meeting hall, thank Master Mou for that. He gave me that idea.’

‘Well, let us just say, Little Brother, that you and I make a great team. I said we would on the boat one year ago, remember ...’

‘Good afternoon!’

The two men jumped at the clear female voices, as out of place in this rough mining camp of Chinamen as anything or anyone possibly could be.

Astounded, they turned to see two young, nice-looking European women smiling at them. One was small, with long dark hair, the other more generously built, sandy curls peeping out from under her bonnet.

Charlie broke into a broad grin. ‘Good afternoon ladies,’ he replied in English. Jack was embarrassed. He tried to smile, but dropped his head with a feeble grunt.

The two women nodded back with warm smiles. They walked on.

Jack was even more surprised to see them enter Mr. Taylor’s house, just up the road. The house had been empty for months, ever since old Ah Poon and the other five occupants who had been renting it returned to China with their hard earned fortunes. Jack found it hard to believe that two young ladies were going to live there, and alone!

When the door closed behind them, Jack whispered to Charlie, as if they might overhear, ‘What are *they* doing here? Ladies can’t mine tin!’

‘What do you think?’ Charlie grinned. ‘Anyway, they’ll do good business, by the look of them.’

‘Business? What sort of business?’

‘Come on, Jack. What do you think young women would be doing in a mining camp?’ He smiled knowingly at Jack, but perceiving Jack’s puzzlement, he recollected just how unusually innocent his friend seemed in matters of the world. More innocent than he would have thought possible for a man who could take on the toughest mine manager in the North-East. ‘The oldest profession in the world, Jack.’ On noting that the look of incomprehension remained on Jack’s face, he sighed. ‘They are *gais*, Jack, prostitutes. You pay them for sex. I imagine they’ll find plenty of customers here.’

Jack shook his head. ‘I just don’t understand that. Doing that with strangers seems such a dirty thing to do. And dangerous: look at poor Robert.’

‘That’s where Master Mou was mistaken, Jack. Having sex with a *gwaipor* doesn’t always end in unhappiness ...’

‘I thought that Master Mou said that making *love* with a *gwaipor* ends in unhappiness. That’s different, isn’t it?’

‘Very different,’ Charlie agreed, ‘you don’t make love to *gais*.’ He paused. ‘*Gais* in mining camps are almost always Europeans. Funny that. Anyway,’ he laughed, ‘they didn’t bring me any unhappiness in Ballarat, I can tell you. So lucky

us, eh? They're almost our neighbours. How convenient! We should pay them a visit now and again. Sometimes a man just needs to reduce the pressure. He collects naughty water on his chest, you might say. It needs draining from time to time!

He noted Jack's raised eyebrows. Charlie immediately appeared thoughtful. 'Sometimes, too, a man just needs a woman, maybe only to talk to, to hold tight, to bring him comfort. *Yin* and *yang*, the two complementary creative urges in the universe: *yin* female, *yang* male. You, Jack Yang, are well-named! You'll soon seek to complete yourself by joining with your female counterpart, er, one way or another.'

'But surely I wouldn't want to seek completion with a *gai*!' Jack exclaimed, looking at the house wherein the two women had just disappeared.

'Up to you,' Charlie shrugged. 'I doubt I'll be seeking completion with my *yin* in yonder house, but I'll certainly be seeking release of more, er, hydraulic pressures!'

But to Jack's astonishment—and undoubtedly to Charlie's disappointment—a sign appeared in their window a couple of days later. They were not *gais* after all.

They were English teachers.

As they walked past the ladies' house, Charlie pointed to the sign with a rueful shrug. 'See, Jack, I was wrong. Many of our fellows will surely wish to learn to speak and to read and write English. I might even brush up on my own.' Sighing, he continued, 'Oh well, I shall just have to walk to Thomas Plains for the other service. And you can come with me. It's about time by the sound of it.'

Jack grinned and nodded. Maybe he would go with Charlie if he was drunk enough. But the thought of visiting a *gai* still worried him. Not for any moral reasons. It was simply that he feared he would be unable to perform properly. The reasons for that fear Jack had always avoided. He knew he should confront his fear head on but he never had.

They had nearly reached their own house when Jack looked over his shoulder back at the women's house. Yes, he decided these teachers were of more interest than Charlie's *gais*. He had learned a smattering of English from Charlie and

Jimmy but he had found out the hard way that few Europeans understood him—or he they, come to that.

Now he could learn English properly, from real teachers.

Being selected excerpts from the voluminous *journal* of

(MISS) TERESA CONWAY

11

Teresa Conway had finished with her life in Hobart and was now embarking on what she called her voyage of discovery. As indeed it would be, for here she was leaving her old—and unsatisfactory—life behind her to venture alone, at the ripe old age of nineteen years and four months, into a strange new world somewhere in the wilds of the Tasmanian bush. Like any captain on a voyage of discovery, she decided to keep a journal of her adventures, from which these excerpts are taken.

Monday the Ninth of September, 1889

Although I know not who my readers may be (pray tell, how could I *possibly* know who might read these scribblings?) I am surely able to say for whom I am writing. I am writing for ‘Hermione’, the younger sister I happen not to possess. That is because writing without thinking of anyone in particular is like talking to oneself: one is inclined to feel rather *silly*. I have always yearned for a younger sister so that I might teach her what I have learned about Life and Affairs of the Heart, &c. So here I record some of my extraordinary adventures both for her instruction and for her *delectation*.

When I address the reader, it is she of whom I am thinking: she, the nonexistent Hermione.

Tuesday the Tenth of September, 1889

I took to Lizzie the moment we met. It was on the brand new Scottsdale train—well nearly brand new. It had started running last month to be precise, the ninth day thereof, to be even more precise. But alas, I know not the time they cut the ribbon.

I went to the Launceston Station early ’cause I wanted an empty compartment, all to my little self. A *pretty* young porter—the cheeky monkey, I caught him staring at my ankles—followed with my baggage; a portmanteau, a valise, and odds and ends tied up with string. I carried my broolly myself, *up* of course as it looks more ladylike that way. That’s me, a perfect young lady (I don’t think).

‘Here’s an empty one, Miss,’ the porter called, opening the carriage door. ‘I’ll stow your things here then shall I?’

‘Yes, please. Here is perfectly *faine*,’ I said, as would a perfect young lady. He entered the carriage, placing my luggage on the overhead rack then stood in the doorway with a fetching smile, the palm of his right hand expectantly heavenwards.

‘For your trouble, my good lad.’ One met the lad’s expectations with a *florin*. Two bob, that is to say, Hermione. His eyes widened, he grinned, winked and was off. A small matter. There’d soon be plenty more where that came from. Florins I mean. Hands too, now I think of it. *And* knees. Then booms-a-daisy!

I thrust my head out the window, looking up and down the platform to see who was boarding the train. I also wanted to make it look like my compartment was full, hee hee. I espied a little Chinese girl tottering along the platform, wearing ornamental headgear and dressed in a *gorgeous* frock of brilliant reds and golds, her feet encased in *tiny* little slippers. An older woman, also Chinese but plainly dressed, clumped along in normal lace-up boots, supporting the girl by her arm.

As she went past my window, the girl looked up and caught my eye. What an amazing face! It was like a doll’s face. No, maybe a girl clown’s face? Ah Hermione, how can I describe that face? Underneath an elaborately adorned headpiece, was something like a posh pudding: a heart-shaped blancmange, flat white, with a couple of chocolate almonds ringed in black, stripes of raspberry and mulberry sauce around heavily rouged cheeks, and lips in the *prettiest* red bow! Can you *imagine* that? As she looked up at me, her little mouth curved up at the ends in a shy smile, as if we were secret mates. Then the two of them moved on to the First Class section of the train. The girl looked to be in her early teens but you can’t tell with Celestials, especially when they pile on all that make-up. I wonder who she was? Was she going to Thomas Plains too? Not in the same game as I, surely? Corlumme, thought I, I couldn’t compete with *her*!

I settled myself down on the padded leather seat to contemplate my future. I am a little fearful, to tell you the truth, Hermione. I have *done* with that flash drum *Lalla Rookh* in Hobart. That was a dead end. None of them silver-tails I met there

would look at a harlot such as I, not on a permanent sort of basis, and I do *not* intend to sell myself—no, rather let us say, to *rent* myself—for the rest of my life.

I had read something *most* interesting in the newspaper that horny old Watchorn had left on my bed—oh yes, I can read and write, very well too, thank you, as you may here discern. I went to Hobart Ladies' College let me tell you, until they dumped me into domestic service after I'd lost both my father *and* my mother. I then found out that the master had a *most* peculiar idea of what 'service' meant, but that's another story that I might tell you later, Hermione.

Now, as I was saying, I read in Watchorn's *Mercury* that there were lots and lots of Chinamen up in the North. Mining for tin they were, and some were making a pretty packet out of it, too. Hmmm, thought I, there's them and all their hoot, and here's little me looking for a new life and for the means of financing such. Promising, wouldn't you think? So off I toddled to the newspaper section of the Tasmanian State Library in Davey Street, nice and handy from *Lalla Rookh*, to read back issues of *The Examiner* and *The Mercury*. I read numerous letters written by old geezers with an opinion about everything, including Chinamen, pro and con. Some said the Chinese were a dirty heathen lot and they shouldn't be allowed in our fair country. Others said they were clean, good, solid workers, and we should thank God for them, because tin was Tasmania's major business and if it wasn't for the Chinamen, God bless 'em, we wouldn't have so much tin to sell and we'd all be that much worse off.

The heart of all this lucrative activity seemed to be a town called Thomas Plains. I hadn't heard of it, but I *had* heard of Scottsdale, which was about to be blessed with a lovely new railway train and wasn't far from Thomas Plains. Tell you what, Hermione, it sounded like it was a *jeweller's shop* up there in the North. But let me tell you something else: I wasn't going there *just* for the gelt. I wanted to find someone with whom I might settle down. A nice, young Chinaman would be just the ticket. Two birds with one stone: money and a husband. Master Thomas Plains, whoever he is when he's at home, was beckoning to little Terry, I can tell you. From what I could gather, there'd be room enough for me and that little China doll. That is, if that *was* her game. Must be. What else could she be up to in that rig-out?

The guard blew his whistle. Clank, hiss, chuff-chuff, lurch, and we were off—and, bless my soul, the carriage door burst open!

‘Hey, give us a hand, will ya?’ A girl had thrown a small port through the door and was struggling to follow, the movement of the train making things somewhat difficult for the poor lass.

I grabbed her hand and hauled her in. She fell half onto the seat and half onto the floor. A nice looking, round, freckled face was looking up at me, laughing fit to bust. She had big eyes the colour of leatherwood honey and sandy hair sticking out from under her bonnet.

‘Gawd, that was close. Ta very much.’ She struggled to her feet with a bit of help from yours truly, and sat opposite me. Patting her hair and clothes into nonexistent order, she opened the conversation. ‘I’m Lizzie. Lizzie Wiggins.’

‘I’m very pleased to meet you, Lizzie. My name’s Teresa Conway. Terry to you.’

I was looking at a girl about my own age, the right side of twenty that is to say, but a touch on the *plumpish* side. She sat with her legs wide apart, her frock hauled up to her knees, letting me know, as if she needed to, that she had well formed legs. Legs that I wager could grip a man around the waist something savage.

She removed her bonnet, revealing a full head of sandy curls. What with those eyes and healthy open face, she was a good-looker alright (if not in the delicately *pretty* way they say I’m supposed to be). I liked the cut of her jib, Hermione: I saw in front of me a plain honest girl, alive, ready for a bit of fun.

Now, I asked myself, what would a plain honest girl, ready for a bit of fun, be doing on a train bound for Scottsdale? Well, Scottsdale at least. Maybe further. Her too, eh?

‘Travelling through to Scottsdale?’ I asked all innocent like.

She nodded.

‘You have relatives there, do you?’

‘No, that’s where I board a coach.’

‘What coach might that be?’ I asked out of curiosity.

‘The George’s River coach. I get off at a place called Thomas Plains.’

‘Well, this *is* a coincidence! That’s where I’m going.’ I immediately felt a great sense of relief; I had found a friend to accompany me in my voyage into the unknown.

Lizzie guffawed, evidently as pleased as I. ‘You too, eh? Wonderful! We’ll keep each other company. Why are you going there?’

‘Ai have *business* there,’ I replied primly, putting on the dog for a bit of a lark. ‘Similar in nature, Ai have little doubt, to that of your own.’

Scottsdale was the end of the line. We hauled our bags out of the carriage and onto the platform. A gangly young porter sauntered up as if it hurt and carried our luggage to the rear of the station, where coaches and horses were lined up.

I tipped this disappointment a tray bit—are not things supposed to be cheaper in the country?—and addressed its spotty face: ‘And where might one ascend the coach for Thomas Plains, my fine young fellow?’

‘The George’s River coach that’d be. Over there, Miss, by the gate. Should be along any moment now.’ He dipped his lid and disappeared.

While we waited, the young Chinese girl and her companion, looked like her maid, posh eh?, walked out of the station. They stopped only a few yards from us. Said girl was looking *very* nervous.

Her eyes touched mine for an instant, then she looked away as a horse and carriage, an old-fashioned barouche, drew up. A young, ginger-headed lad stepped down and opened the door to help an ugly old Chinaman alight from the rear. Hermione, you should have seen him! Said Chinaman was constructed in *squares*; a stocky lump of a body topped with a square head. He was dressed to the nines, in a dark suit, lacy cravat and weskit. He had a top hat in his hand. The young man stood respectfully back, as did the girl’s maid, leaving the old man and the young girl centre stage, so to speak. The old man creased his face in what I supposed was intended as a smile. He said something I didn’t understand. Must have been in Chinese.

The girl averted her head, saying nothing but looked back at the maid as if for help. The look on her little face, despite the make-up, was one of complete

horror. Her head dropped. She seemed to shrink into a ball, her arms crossed tightly over her bosom. Tears sprang from her eyes, as if she was squeezing herself dry. Suddenly she looked up—straight at little *me*! Her mouth was a bright, red-rimmed O, an O screaming silently for help. From me? What could I do? I didn't know what was going on.

The old man looked impatient. He plonked his top hat back on his square head in an angry gesture. He muttered something gruffly, pushing her into the rear seat of the barouche, while he sat himself opposite. The girl sat with head bowed, her face covered with her hands, her body shaking as she sobbed. The young man and the maid mounted the front of the barouche. A flick of the whip and off they rattled, out the station gate.

What was all that about? Where were they going? By now I was beginning to form an idea. And that idea was that I'd just seen the recruitment of an unwilling party to my own line of business.

Yellow slavery, I suppose you'd call it.

12

Wednesday the Eleventh of September, 1889

The road out of Scottsdale was potholed and dusty. The coach was slow and we passengers had to stop overnight in the town of Derby to rest the horses. Derby looked like a rough, tough place. The town itself straddled a narrow road poised on a cliff. On the high side of the road, houses seemed to tumble uphill in impossible fashion. The Ringarooma River ran swiftly at the foot of the cliff and the Briseis Mine dominated the hill on the opposite side to the town. Lizzie and I obtained lodgings in Brothers' Home Hotel for the night. We didn't see many Chinamen, actually we didn't see any, but there were copious numbers of unshaven, grubby looking miners packed into the public bar, shouting, swearing and drinking hard. Positively *vile* suggestions were shouted in our direction, as we proceeded through the bar on our way to the dining room that night.

'Lizzie, we're receiving the hot eye. Don't look up. Let's eat quickly and hasten to our room.'

After a hearty breakfast of fried lamb chops, fried eggs and fried bread, we re-boarded the coach and rattled and rolled on our way again. Around noon, the horses broke into a trot as we descended the hill into Thomas Plains, no doubt the poor animals were anticipating their oats and a good drink, as indeed were we. We stopped outside a newish looking establishment; 'All Nations Hotel, Prop. Mr. Albert Taylor' it said on the sign. At least it appeared to be better than our lodgings of the previous night. The coachman unloaded our baggage and dropped it and us at the front door.

I had already written to the proprietor to book a room. Now it appeared that he had arranged a *reception* committee. A group of men, dirty, unshaven, in stained and tattered brown wincey shirts and moleskins, were lounging outside, leaning against the wall or the hitching rail, staring at us, grinning. Anything less like the gents at *Lalla Rookh*, with their morning suits, waistcoats, spats and top hats, I could not imagine. And not a Celestial among them. I didn't know what Lizzie's clientele had been like—we had yet to exchange such girlish secrets—but from the look of

her, she was as happy about all this as I was. We stared at each other, sharing the same thought: Into what sort of situation *had* we allowed ourselves to wander?

‘Welcome to Thomas Plains!’ A stubble-faced old goat with a missing front tooth or two announced, bowing deeply and sweeping the ground with a battered old bush-hat. ‘What? Not one, but *two* lovely young ladies! Well, well, we ain’t used to entertaining the fairer sex, but we shall do our utmost to oblige. Won’t we lads? Three cheers for ... for ... who? Who do we have the pleasure? ... Your *names* girls, please...’

I thought we should maintain some dignity, so I curtly replied. ‘Ai am Miss Teresa Conway and my friend here is Miss Elizabeth Wiggins.’

‘Oh, classy, eh lads? *Miss* Teresa and *Miss* Elizabeth. Such pretty names for such pretty lasses, eh lads? Very well then, three cheers for Terry and Lizzie ... hip, hip ...’

‘HOORAY!’ they all shouted.

Should I not have guessed what our prospective customers in the lawless bush would be like? How could we descend to this level—these smelly, dirty men, one after the other? And then what? These were *not* the sort of customers for whom I at least had come all this way. Where were the clean, polite Chinamen I’d read about?

I grabbed Lizzie’s arm. Heads held high, we pushed past and entered the front door, into the tavern. A large middle-aged man stood behind the bar, his hands placed flat on the counter. He wore a red weskit, shirt sleeves rolled up. The hue of his face matched his weskit, fierce mutton-chop whiskers completing the unappealing picture.

‘May I speak to the proprietor, a Mr. Taylor Ai believe?’

‘You are,’ he grunted. ‘I am Mr. Taylor. Himself.’ He straightened up, his scowl imitating a smile. ‘One of you must be Miss Conway, is that not so?’

‘I am she.’ At least I’d had the forethought to *acquaint* him of my arrival per courtesy of Her Majesty’s Mail, but now there were two of us. ‘And as you can see, Miss Wiggins has joined me. She would also like a room.’

‘Sorry, ladies. I didn’t realise there be two of you. You shall have to share.’

He reached behind the bench and removed a big iron key from a long rack. ‘Number Seven. Go through the bar—oh, and by the way, the table in the corner’s our Parlour Bar should you ladies care to partake of the drop that cheers, ha ha—and you’ll see a door under the sign that says Residents. Go in, turn left, last door on the left. Now, your baggage?’

‘It has been deposited at the front door.’

‘Leave it. I’ll bring it myself.’

I was pleased that Number Seven was at the far end of the corridor. It felt safer, more *private*. I opened the door to see a double bed at one end of the room, a single at the other, chamber pots under each, a washstand under the window, and one solitary wardrobe. At least it had a mirror.

‘Well, what do you think?’ I asked Lizzie.

‘We could both use the double, save the other for customers.’

‘That’s not what I’m thinking. I’m thinking “Have we made a bloody great big bloomer, coming here?” That’s what I’m thinking. We can’t share a room in our line of business.’

‘Some men might like doing it in front of their mates. I come across that before today.’

‘No, we can’t *both* use this room.’

‘*Here!* Where do I go then?’

‘No, Lizzie, I didn’t mean it like that. Course not. We’ll just have to think of something.’

There was a bang on the door and without a by-your-leave Mr. Taylor stepped inside as if he owned the place. Which, as it happened, he did. He was carrying all our baggage, which he unceremoniously dropped on the floor. He straightened up.

‘Now ladies, I think we need to have a little chat, you and I.’ He pulled a pipe from his pocket and examined it closely, avoiding our eyes.

‘Yes, Mr. Taylor?’

‘Well, I need to know something about your business here. I could possibly be of some assistance. I have some influence in this town, and if you are to be successful—in *whatever* it is you are up to—you’ll have to be on my right side.’

‘Why not on your left side, Mr. Taylor?’ Lizzie moved behind him, pressing up to him, sliding her hand into his left trouser pocket.

His florid face flushed a deeper red. He stepped forward, leaving Lizzie’s hand dangling. ‘Be serious,’ he said, trying not to smile. And *yes*, a rising in his trousers told me that our Lizzie had scored a hit. ‘Yes, just as I thought. Now, sit down. As I said, you two young ladies and I are going to have a little chat,’ he ordered, waving us to the larger bed. He sat on the smaller.

‘I cannot allow that my hotel be used as a house of ill-repute. One saucy baggage tried it last year and, er, well the missus didn’t take too kindly to that. So no, sorry girls. Anyway, as you see, you’d be crowded for space.’ He stood up, walked to the window, examined a tree just outside, then turned to face us.

‘Now, why come here, here of all places, two nice looking girls like you? The men hereabouts are as tough as they come. Girls like you would be flayed alive. They’d chew you up and swallow you. You need some male protection.’

‘*You* don’t waste time in getting to the point,’ I said, half-closing my eyes for effect.

He bridled at that. But I had to let him know we were not innocent young softies, did I not? However, I must admit that since coming here I was finding myself softer than I had thought hitherto. And he was right. In *Lalla Rookh* we girls were looked after, little chance there that obstreperous customers might create grief for a girl. I shouldn’t care to dwell on what might happen if these scallywags, ex-convicts and Derwent ducks to a man I’d wager, decided to help themselves.

I tried another tack, which was nearer the truth. ‘I didn’t come here to sell myself to *anyone*, Mr. Taylor. Where are all these nice, clean, polite Chinamen? I, we, have been business girls long enough to know what we want. In the fullness of *tainte*, Mr. Taylor, we should care to marry and to raise a family.’

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘now that is different. There’s Celestials as live in Thomas Plains, and there’s others camped at Emu Flat, a couple of mile up Emu Flat Road

there.’ He jerked his head towards the window. ‘Emu Flat would be your best bet—absolutely no competition and no Europeans to complicate matters. But you should know a thing or two. First, many of them miners are married, with families back in China. Sojourners we call ’em. They make their pile then they’re off like it’s the Pioneer races. That don’t mean to say one or two don’t get lonely, now and again. But they’re more cautious than our lads about a bit on the side, type of thing.

‘Then there’s quite a few who ain’t married and, oh yes, some would relish a bit of female company now and again, if you take my meaning. Then there’s others yet again who might indeed care to enter into holy matrimony with a decent, upright clean-living Christian woman, ha ha. If that’s what you want, my dears, good luck to you. I for one wouldn’t hold it against you, although there’s some as might.’ He beamed at us paternally. ‘Yes, hooking a European wife is seen by a Chinaman as a bit of a victory. Even Tommy Ah Chung sees it that way.’

He looked thoughtful, pulled out a battered leather pouch from deep within his trews and started carefully filling that pipe he’d been fiddling with all this time. Oh dear, I recognised the symptoms—and sure as eggs are eggs, a *yarn* followed.

‘Yairs, Tommy married old Daisy Smithers. More’n just a year or two older than him she was. She came from Gould’s Country did old Daisy, a rough ’un to be sure but a good hearted sort, when all’s said and done. Pity they never produced no kiddies. Things might have been different if they had. Anyway, he works hard all day and smokes opium all night. So Daisy, poor old soul, joins him at night but in her case, she relishes the booze—Europeans don’t go much for the poppy. She always liked her drop, she did, but when Tommy started flitting off into dreamland on a regular basis she hit the bottle good and proper. I do her a favour and deliver a case every now and then, on discount, type of thing.’

‘What about Chinese women? Do any Chinamen have Chinese wives here?’ Lizzie asked.

‘Not many. There ain’t many Chinese women here, you see. Most of the men are sojourners, like I said, with wives back in China. Some of the older Chinamen brought their wives out—not many of them, too expensive—but there are some, and of course they have daughters. But, funny that, many a Chinamen marries a white

woman, but very few Chinese women marry white men. When Chinese girls grow up they stick with Chinamen. Well there's one who didn't—Suzie Ah Kit from Branhholm. A pretty little thing she was, married young Bill Plomley. They snuck off to Derby to tie the knot but her Mum and Dad didn't hold with that, not for one minute. They insisted she still live with them, while Bill, her own hubbie, lives in his own dwelling just across the road! She cooks and cleans for him, and all that, and I have no doubt she gives him a bit now and again, but she still ain't allowed to live with him, her own husband ...'

He trailed off, chuckling at the strange ways of the Chinese. But the way his bright, blue, beady eyes were looking us up and down made me wonder if it was at us that he was really laughing. 'So you want to marry a Chink, is that it? Well, I suppose there's no accounting for taste.'

'Yes, but taste and try, Mr. Taylor. Taste and try before you buy, that's what I always say,' Lizzie put in.

He grinned, inspecting his pipe carefully. When satisfied that he had filled it with all due care, he put his pouch away.

'Now like I said, I can't have you setting up shop here, not obvious like, but one of me cobbers owns a lovely dwelling just this side of the Sek Lung mine in Emu Flat. Homely, it is, comfy and safe. Big too, comprising three rooms as it does. You could use two for bedrooms. Ideal for professional ladies such as yourselves. You'd be as snug as a bug in a rug there, you would. Two bugs in fact, ha ha. Now, my cobber who owns this place would charge a reasonable rent, of course he would. I would collect that on his behalf,' he paused to wink at Lizzie, 'and I'd make sure the lads gave you no trouble. Just so long as you paid up on time, type of thing.'

As I said, Mr. Taylor didn't beat about the bush. But to be fair, he appeared to be setting us up on our feet—on our backs more like—just as we wanted.

'Oh, and one more thing. Them Celestials are nice easy people, but they're funny about appearances. Face, they call it. It wouldn't do to advertise. So let's look at it from their point of view. Now then, what would pretty young lasses like you two be doing in a miner's camp, living in the house next door type of thing, eh?'

'Er, mining tin?' I ventured.

He snorted. ‘Girls? Miners? Nah.’ He lit his confounded pipe at last, eyeing us carefully through clouds of smoke. ‘Teachers,’ he said finally.

‘*Teachers?*’ Lizzie and I gasped as one.

‘Yairs. You think about it. All them Celestials, most unable to speak much English, and hardly none at all can *write*. There’s bound to be a good few who’d want to talk English proper. And read and write too, come to that.’ He paused, removing his pipe and looking us up and down as if we were sheep in a sale yard. ‘So yes,’ he repeated, ‘teachers.’

Our bludger replaced his stinking pipe, took a long hard pull, and yawned a blast of smoke at us. He left. Trails of smoke remained in the still, warm air of our room, the smell of his proposition remaining in our nostrils.

But, you know, there are times when one rather savours pipe smoke, especially a good strong shag.

13

Wednesday the Eleventh of September, 1889

After Lizzie and I partook of a hot dinner in Mr. Taylor's *daining* room—not half bad neither, I'm pleased to relate—we returned to our room in the All Nations to sort things out. After which, we had planned to explore the place a little, get our bearings type of thing, as Mr. Taylor himself might say.

As I started unpacking, I felt Lizzie peering over my shoulder. 'What on earth's in that?' she demanded.

I looked down at the lumpy, brown paper-bag in my hand. 'Lemons,' I replied.

'Lemons?'

'Yes, lemons.'

'What do you want with all them lemons?'

'Well, you place a slice where it matters most. You know, nice and high up. Then you don't get the pox, so they say. No babies neither.'

'Dicken. Ain't you just so full of bullshit!'

'It's true! Cross my heart and spit. Learned that at *Lalla Rookh*, I did.'

'Coo, bugger me.'

'Only if you place a slice of lemon up first.'

'You're daft!' She shoved me on the shoulder. We both screeched with laughter.

There was a knock on the door. Giggling like a naughty schoolgirl, Lizzie opened it.

'Why, Mr. Taylor! What a *pleasant* surprise!'

'Good afternoon, girls. I trust you enjoyed your dinner at my humble hostelry?'

'Well, yes, we did as a matter of fact ...'

'Nothin' like a couple of dollops of mash with such a *large* sausage placed between 'em.' Liz widened those gorgeous big honey-coloured eyes of hers at him.

He folded into a smile. 'All local fare, nice and fresh like, nothing but the best. Just for today, let us say it's on the house for two pretty, young ladies. My little gesture of welcome, type of thing.'

'Oh, Mr. Taylor, you are *ever* so kind,' Liz moved from widening to fluttering her eyes.

He was lapping this up like a kitten laps milk. 'Oh, I think we can drop the "Mr. Taylor", eh? Call me Bertie, girls. Likewise, I shall call you Lizzie and Terry, isn't that it? Good-o. Well now, is there anything else you'd like to know?'

'Well, yes, there is. You said there were no working girls here at Emu Flat, but how about Thomas Plains. You never finished explaining that.'

'Well, there are of course, but not in my hotel, as I told you. There's one or two knock-shops in town, patronised by Europeans mostly, and there's a couple of girls going the rounds in the men's camps.'

'Any Chinese working girls?' I was hoping to learn more of the Chinese girl on the train.

'No, none, only a few Europeans like yourselves. And they usually don't last long, I should tell you. But it depends where they operate. Seems to work different in the Chinese camps, where you're going. The girls tend to settle with one man for a while, then they move on to the next. I reckon they have trouble in communicating, see, so they save themselves from dying of boredom by taking a change of scenery, type of thing. Or like old Daisy they just take to the bottle. See now why I suggested you set up as teachers? Teach 'em English and you got something to talk about on a fine, wet Sunday afternoon.'

Bertie was beginning to impress me. But he hadn't answered my question. Knowing that the local proprietor would be privy to town gossip, I pushed for more.

'On the Scottsdale train we saw a little Chinese girl all done up to the nines like she was a real classy trollop. But she howled her eyes out when an old man picked her up at the station and whisked her off. Looked like she was being shanghaied into our line of business, but you said there were no Chinese trollops here. What was all that about, then?'

Bertie laughed. ‘Oh no, it weren’t nothing of the kind. Dear me, no. That was old Ah Chee’s new bride. Ah Chee runs one of the largest stores for the Celestials—vegetables, groceries, Chinese products, you name it. His house is in Anchor Street and a costly dwelling that is. Yairs, Ah Chee’s been magging on about his bride for years. That beautiful little creature you saw was promised to him by her parents, a contract drawn up all signed, sealed and delivered, legal like, when she was only a child. Still is, I suppose. Fifteen years old, poor mite. They arrived here late last night. Had their wedding breakfast, I suppose you’d call it, right here in my dining room. She didn’t eat a scrap of my bonzer tucker. She just sat there, crying her poor little heart out. I suppose she was horrified to discover that her husband-to-be was an ugly old bugger like Ah Chee. Not that’s he’s a bad’un by any means. Being all square in shape, he might look like what comes out of a wombat’s arse, but he’s a decent enough fellow. She’ll find that out, all in good time. But you can’t blame her for turning on the waterworks, bloody oath you can’t. Anyway, she’s stuck with him now. Well, that’s their ways. Not for us to judge, I suppose.’

‘What’s her Christian name?’

‘Well seeing as how she ain’t no Christian I don’t suppose she has one. But Ah Chee told everyone who wanted to listen that his bride’s name was Mei Yook, “Beautiful Jade” he said that meant. Now she answers to M-a-y, May Ah Chee.’

Poor girl! Stuck out here in a foreign place with an ugly old man she doesn’t know for a husband, unable to talk to anyone else except her unprepossessing maid. I imagined that little May was going to need a friend, a female shoulder to shed her tears on; a local girl’s shoulder, who knew the ropes—not that frumpy old bag who was with her.

Well now, Hermione, who else but little me? London to a brick she knows as much English as I know Chinese, but I felt a bond with her, truly I did. When our eyes first met in Launceston we *liked* each other, I could feel it. Then again at the Scottsdale station. When she discovered her intended was not the elegantly handsome prince she’d been dreaming about since leaving her village in China but an ugly old man, she was so *bitterly* disappointed she appealed to me for help. Me,

the only friend she thought she had in this strange new country. Oh dear, I felt weepy myself, still do, just thinking about it. Fancy that now, me, in my line of business!

But Mr. Taylor was not finished.

‘Now, ladies, to business,’ said he, easing off his braces. ‘Who’s to be first?’

14

Thursday the Twelfth of September, 1889

Thanks to Bertie Taylor, I had a grand excuse to visit May and deliver some cheer-up to the poor child if I could. Now I was to be a teacher I would teach her English! Maybe she could teach me Chinese too. That would be useful in my other line of business. Since hubbie must himself be doing handsomely running the local store for the Chinese—he'd be a shingle or two short if he wasn't—little Terry might make some extra scratch as well.

A few discreet enquiries brought to light the intelligence that Ah Chee's house was number 4 Anchor Street, and that Anchor Street was first turn right, second turn left from the hotel. So this morning, having traversed Mr. Ah Chee's nicely laid out garden, there was I tripping daintily up the front steps to the porch of his *humble* little dwelling—I don't think. You should see it, Hermione! It's an extremely large house set in this magnificent garden, and here was I standing in front of an elaborately carved front door with pretty leadlight panels on each side. I tugged the bell-pull.

A muffled clanging came from inside, and moments later the door opened. A young girl dressed in a maid's uniform stood there. She was about my height, hay coloured hair in a bun, but rather too *stout*—indulging in too much country cream by the look of her. Otherwise, she was pretty enough in a simple country haystack kind of way. She gave me the once-over, like I'd just given her.

'May Ai speak to Mrs. Ah Chee, the lady of the house, please?'

'She don't speak no English. You can talk to her companion if you like.'

'Ah yes, Ai should care to speak with both, if you please. That is whay Ai am 'ere.' I had thought it more *seemly* to lay it on in such a posh situation, but I slipped up somewhat on that last haspirate. Not that the maid would have noticed.

'You better come in then.' She nodded me inside. She led me to a large, sunny parlour decorated with cane furniture and bloody great big porcelain pots

containing bamboos and other green things. There was a funny spicy scent in the air, something like incense.

‘Please take a seat, Miss, er, ’oo do I say is calling?’

‘Miss Teresa Conway.’

I sat on the edge of a cane armchair. I didn’t have to wait long. A Chinese woman entered, the companion, maid, whatever she was. She could have been in her thirties or forties, or even fifties come to that. She looked like a flathead, with her broad face and dull eyes. The fish was wearing a long navy blue dress with a small lace collar, European style.

‘Yes?’

‘I wish to pay my respects to Mrs. Ah Chee. I am an English teacher.’

‘You English?’

‘No, I *teach* English. Remember me? I saw you and Mrs. Ah Chee on the train.’

‘Train?’

‘Yes, train. I saw you both on the train.’

Our lively exchange was interrupted by a peal of loud birdsong I took to be Chinese. The girl—I found it hard to think of her as ‘Mrs. Ah Chee’—tottered into the room with fast little steps. She was wearing black trousers and a green silk shirt with a high, stiff embroidered collar. She was not wearing make-up, allowing me to see her features. Gracious me, she was just so delicate and *sweet*, her hair pinned up in a simple coiffure and all! Hermione, was it you, my nonexistent young sister? Hardly, seeing as how I’m not Chinese, but sisterly is how the dear child made me feel. Oh yes, thought I, I would care very much to make you feel happier about your so far unfortunate lot.

She looked at me, her dark eyes rounded in surprise, her eyebrows sitting in perfect black half-circles. Suddenly a brilliant smile lit her pretty little face. She turned to her companion and, hand to her mouth confidentially, as if I was not to overhear, she trilled away in a high-pitched, little girl’s voice.

‘She say she see you on train,’ the flathead explained.

‘Yes, as I said, I saw you both on the train.’ Gawd, we’ll get nowhere at this rate, I thought. I walked over to the girl, hand outstretched.

‘I am Teresa. You are May?’

She clasped my hand between both of hers and leaned towards me, sort of bowing but looking up with a smile larger than her face. ‘Tleesa! Mei!’

A hit!

I treated her hands to a little squeeze before releasing them. I turned to her companion, bowing slightly and offering my hand formally. ‘Miss Conway, but you may call me Teresa.’

‘Ah Yee.’ She touched my hand as if it might bite her.

With names out of the way we all sat smiling at each other, May with genuine warmth, which I returned. I was just so pleased that she’d cheered up after what must have been a pretty nasty shock on finding ugly old Ah Chee was her intended. Not to mention the nastier shocks she must have endured after the wedding breakfast. Now *that* was something I should really like to know about: how this completely innocent little virgin, I’ll be bound, managed to receive a lumpy old brute like him.

Ah Yee went to the fireplace and tugged a thick red rope with a long tassel. The maid appeared. ‘Tea, Beatrice.’

Beatrice reappeared with a tray, upon which was a fragile-looking looking teapot with a delicate floral design, three tiny cups, and a plate of pleasant looking little biscuits. Ah Yee dismissed Beatrice and served the tea herself, *without* asking me if I preferred to take my tea with milk and sugar.

I conveyed to Ah Yee, who spoke enough English for us to get by, the idea that I was a real whizz-bang at teaching English to Chinamen and they both seemed to agree what a *wonderful* idea English lessons would be—as long as old Ah Chee approved. If he didn’t, which was on the cards as I gained the impression that he was a possessive old toad, then we might just *not tell* him, might we not? In other words, it looks like I’m on, as from next Monday morning. At least I thought that’s what was agreed.

Two tiny cups of insipid tea the colour of wee, and a couple of those ducky little coconutty biscuit things later, I departed. In the excitement of the moment, I forgot to raise the little matter of emolument, which was *most* unlike me.

15

Friday, the Thirteenth of September, 1889.

Friday the thirteenth, our lucky day! I don't think.

For a start, Bertie Taylor's little love nest is more than just a couple of miles from town. Three more like, and bleeding *uphill* most of the way. A little detail he didn't mention, did he? We had to hire a horse and cart to get us and our dunnage here. A fine how-do-you-do when we want to go shopping, visit our friends, partake of some waine in Mr. Taylor's singular Parlour Bar and do what young ladies do when they are not engaged in the businesses of teaching or of harlotry. An hour by shank's pony each way, that's what it is, give or take.

As for Bertie's so-called 'lovely dwelling', please, may I describe it to you? There are two bedrooms on either side of a large room, that large room possessing a wide fireplace with a high grating on one side and a chimney with a hook hanging down, upon which hangs the *billy*. Bugger that. Our first purchase will be a decent iron kettle. And where is the water tap with which one might fill said utensil? Nowhere to be seen. A tall cupboard and a large table and washbasin complete our kitchen cum bathroom cum laundry cum living room cum parlour. Oh, and there we have a *window* beside our sturdy front door. Luxury!

But one must not grumble, must one? Our dwelling seems to be a veritable palace for hereabouts, as far as I can see so far. But after *Lalla Rookh*, it's a country dunny. And speaking of which, on going outside we discover there isn't one, something else Bertie omitted to mention. A couple of large empty jam tins under each bed give us the drum for number ones, but what about jobbies? Ah, and *there* is our water supply—a small water tank with a tap in its base on a rough wooden stand against the back wall of the house. Obtaining a drink of water in the middle of a cold, dark, wet winter's night is going to more than a little *bothersome*.

And what of our neighbourhood? We didn't have to walk very far before our noses told us with a loud shout what the sanitary arrangements were. In the middle of a cluster of huts was one enveloped in a pong so hideous it was *visible*. To our sensitive nostrils, said hut appeared to be enshrouded in a miasma of a deep purple shade.

Our latrine is a public long-drop we are to share with the Chinamen!

'We can't use that!' cried Lizzie, horror-struck.

'Bertie will have to build us our own private one, that's all. Meantime, we'll have to sneak into the bush when nature calls. We shall add a gardening trowel to this afternoon's shopping list.'

We walked back to town, to the All Nations to be exact, there to sup some of Bertie's faine victuals, with a glass or two of *waine* to be sure. Thus fortified, we nobbled him about the dunny.

He was all concern. 'Yes, I see your point,' said he. 'You girls can't use the men's shithouse, course you can't.' He screwed up his eyes and scratched his chin. A charming sight. 'Tell you what. I'll arrange a nice tidy little job, out of sight and sound, back of the house type of thing. But I shall have to charge for materials. I'll have one of me men do the job. Build the latrine, I mean, ha ha.'

'But Mr. Taylor, *Bertie* I mean,' Lizzie's eyes kneaded him like he was dough, 'the materials wouldn't cost *that* much, would they? If you came and did the job *yourself*, we'd make you ever so welcome, wouldn't we Terry? Then we'd be all square, eh Bertie?'

Bertie sighed in happy defeat. I was thereupon about to raise the question of a decent water tank with a tap piped through to the kitchen but caution prevailed. Enough was enough for one day. We shall have our new water supply in the fullness of time—also at no cost, monetarily speaking, don't you worry about that, Hermione.

We purchased most of our needs from Ah Chee rather than Allingham's General Store because I wanted Ah Chee to be well disposed towards me concerning my visits to sweet little May. I wished to teach her English, while I, for my part, wished to learn Chinese, but more than both those reasons, I wished to become her trusted *friend*. I cannot rightly tell you, Hermione, why May had become quite so important to me, but indeed she had. My soft little heart went out to her in her strange predicament.

So when we visited her husband's store and clapped eyes on the old galoot up close, I saw how apt was Bertie's description. Old Ah Chee was indeed a right-angled brown lump, light fuzz on his brown head, precisely the shape and adornment that through some miracle of nature emerges from a wombat's bowels via a circular orifice. That settled it. It was 'Old Wombat Shit' from thereon in, Old WS for short. He was deserving of such a name anyway 'cause he overcharged something dreadful.

'Cost of transport from Launceston,' said he, '£5 a ton it cost me.'

Methought we should remember 'cost of transport' when we start selling *our* goods.

Our purchases, including a very fine solid kettle that I promised myself would be simmering on the hob night and day, were too much for us to carry back

ourselves. I asked him if he could deliver to Emu Flat. Indeed he could: ‘Pete deliver, two shilling. Special for you.’

‘Very well, but for that he can take us back with him.’ We’d enough of walking for one day.

Pete was the lusty young lad with ginger hair and a smattering of freckles whom we’d seen him before at Scottsdale Railway Station.

‘Oh yeah, I remember you two watching. How could I forget such smashers as you two, eh? Come on, ups-a-daisy girls, one each side o’ me.’ He leant over and held out his hand.

Lizzie grabbed his hand quick sticks, beating me by half a second, the bitch. I made a mental note. We shall have to work out a system about customers if we are to thrive in our trade and remain the excellent friends that we have become.

As we rolled down the road, he was off. A talkative lad, was Pete. It seemed that he entertained some reservations about his boss. ‘He’s a mean old bugger, that’s his main trouble. I don’t reckon he deserves that pretty little tart of his. But I’m on the road most of the time, out of Squarehead’s way. I like deliverin’, I get to know what’s what, who’s up who, type of thing. Anyway, what’s two bonzer lookin’ sheilas like you doin’ in a dump like Emu Flat? As if I can’t guess,’ he leered.

Cheeky. ‘We are *teachers*, Pete,’ I said in my prim voice.

‘Officially,’ Lizzie added.

‘Ha! And unofficially?’

Lizzie placed her hand on his thigh, and fluttered those big honey coloured orbs at him. She is a *professional*, is our Lizzie.

Soon as Pete halted the cart outside our house, it was settled. He followed Lizzie to her room, while I unpacked the afternoon’s purchases to the sounds of rutting. I found the noise *unsettling*, strange to relate.

Pete didn’t stay after his last, loud gargle. ‘Squarehead’s gonna chip me if I’m late,’ he advised, as he strode from her room hoisting his braces over his shoulders.

Lizzie emerged from her bedroom adjusting her dress. The look in her eye was *not* that of a professional. Oh dear, had she fallen for him?

She was unforthcoming on that point, upon my making gentle enquiries.

16*Friday the Thirteenth still*

By four o'clock or thereabouts things were more or less shipshape and it was time to resume prowling the neighbourhood. At least now we knew where our neighbours performed number twos. The fellows were still down at the mine, which was just as well as we didn't want them to think we were being sticky beaks while we saw what was what.

My jaw dropped when I realised how most of them lived. The public bog should have been warning enough. They had constructed dwellings—shelters more like, some of them—of whatever was nearest to hand: planks, tin sheets, sacking, bark, branches, rocks, you tell me. Few had chimneys, and those that did were made of *wood*! Seemed liked they were asking for trouble. Ours was at least made of tin.

I peeped in an open door. Nobody at home, so we sneaked inside. Looked like they slept on the floor, five or six of them; three-legged stools surrounded a low table, piles of junk everywhere. A not unpleasant aroma of smoke and spice hung in the still, dim air. There was a fireplace in the middle of the room where they obviously cooked. I supposed the smoke was meant to seep out through slits in the roof but there was enough still remaining to smoke a cod. Just leave it on that little table for an hour or two and Bob would be your uncle. I checked a hut with a chimney. There was a big bucket of water standing by, in case the chimney itself caught alight, I imagine. Give me our tin chimney any day.

We proceeded to another collection of huts on the far side of Emu Flat. Looked like the married quarters—at least, a straggle of houses with women and children in them. The first we came across was distinguished by a pile of empty brandy bottles by the front door.

'First time I seen that around here. Like me dad's house that is,' Lizzie remarked.

'Whadda youse want?' The front door suddenly crashed open and a European woman glared out at us, one hand steadying herself on the door, her other clutching a bottle. Her nose and cheeks were red, her eyes bloodshot. Daisy Ah

Chong, surely to God. An effluvium redolent of second-hand brandy, garbage, and general unpleasantness rolled over us, suffocating even from the distance at which we were standing.

‘Hello, I’m Terry and this is Lizzie. We’ve just moved here.’

‘We’re teachers,’ Lizzie added.

‘Whadda fuckin’ teachers doin’ ’ere?’

‘Teaching English to any Chinese who want to learn,’ I smiled sweetly.

‘Tell ya wot. Ya won’t be teachin’ my old bugger no English. Bin tryin’ myself for years. All ’e knows is “brandy”, “fuck” ’n’ “tucker”. Fuckin’ tucker, all right.’ She tipped her head back as laughter cackled forth. ‘Drive a woman to drink, ’e would.’

‘What is your name?’ I asked nicely. I assumed it was Daisy, but I didn’t want to say so in case this was not said lady. And if it was her, she would be justified in assuming we had been talking about her. She looked like she might be a trifle *sensitive* about being the subject of the conversation of others.

‘What’s it to you?’

‘Just being friendly.’

‘I’m not feelin’ friendly. Piss orff.’ She slammed the door shut.

‘Christ, is that what livin’ here does to ya?’ Lizzie asked quietly as we turned down the track.

‘Bertie did warn us,’ I advised.

‘Hey!’

We looked back. She’d opened the door and stuck her head out.

‘Mrs. Ah Chong to youse!’ she bawled at us. She slammed the door again.

A little further on were some more houses. Two Chinese women, in their thirties or forties maybe, hard to tell, were outside, dressed in white shirts and black trousers, each wearing a large straw hat. One was poking around her garden with a couple of little kids, the other beating the daylights out of some wet garments with a stick.

They looked more friendly than poor Daisy. ‘Let’s introduce ourselves,’ I said to Lizzie.

The kids scarpered at the sight of us and even the two women looked a little worried. But I smiled, and walked up to them.

‘Teresa,’ said I, pointing to my chest.

‘Lizzie,’ said she, doing likewise. Pointing to her chest, that is to say.

They babbled words that escaped our comprehension, grinning so much it must have hurt, and then clasped their hands in front of their chests and bowed, like we were Queen Victoria herself. One covered her mouth with her hand, as if she was covering a belch. A little girl scuttled from somewhere to clutch her mother’s leg, and peeped at us shyly, giggling. Hermione, what a *gorgeous* little doll! She was so quaintly pretty I wanted to slip her into my pocket, take her home, and place her on the mantelpiece. That is, if Bertie’s lovely dwelling had risen to such.

So the ‘natives’ were friendly. Whether they’d be quite so friendly if, or when, they discovered that we may be competing with them for their husbands on the odd occasion was another matter. As I saw it, that was up to their husbands not up to us. But I supposed they may not see it that way if occasion arose.

As we walked back to our house, the men began returning from their toil. Houses started buzzing like beehives, with Chinamen rushing around doing whatever Chinamen do. Many had veggie gardens they were tending, others were chopping wood into neat stacks. Busy little blighters. We came across a group outside their hut, stripped to the waist, leaning over a large tin washbasin, washing and then dabbing themselves dry with small cloths. At least that’s what they were doing before one of them looked up and spotted us. He jabbered with fright and ran inside, followed by the others.

‘See, they’re so bleeding modest, they’ll never come knocking on our door for a little bit of tickle-me-fancy,’ Lizzie said.

I feared she had a point. ‘Possibly it is as Bertie said. We need first to be accepted as part of the normal scene, as teachers.’

‘And just how do we let them know that? Stick up a big notice saying “WE TEACH ENGLISH! ROLL UP ROLL UP, 6d. A POP”? Fat lot of good that would do when they don’t know no English.’

‘Must be someone here who speaks English and can write Chinese. We’ll ask them to write us a notice in Chinese. How about that?’

‘Who then?’

It hit me. ‘Ah Yee! I’m seeing her Monday.’

We were about fifty yards from our place, passing a house much like ours in that it had a decent chimney. It seemed that only two miners lived there, a young cove—not half bad, so it seemed to my not inexperienced eye—and an older one who seemed as interesting as a haunch of corned horse. They were outside chattering, while the younger one watered their struggling little garden. At least it was in better condition than our two rows of dried up stalks.

‘Be nice to our neighbours, Lizzie,’ I whispered as we passed close by.

‘Good afternoon!’ we called sweetly in unison.

We might have fired a gun the way they leapt round. The younger one sort of smiled in a shy kind of way, then dropped his head. Sweet, really. The other surprised me by saying ‘Good afternoon ladies’ in passable English. Oh well, they won’t be customers for the English lessons.

But Hermione, I promise you the nice looking young cove shall tend Terry’s little garden too one fine day, see if he don’t.

Chop some wood for us too, he can.

17

Monday, the Sixteenth of September, 1889

Lizzie joined me this morning for the visit to Anchor Street. Ah Yee had some bad news. She sat there, her head bowed, bobbing it up and down every now and again to show how apologetic she was. May sat beside her, looking stricken.

‘Master say no need May learn English. It is because Master not want her leave house. No need. I speak English to Beatrice, Beatrice go buy grocery. Therefore May no need speak English, waste of money, he say.’

So they *had* assumed I was a professional teacher and would expect to be paid. I thought fast and decided, unlike me, to put that problem to rest.

‘No need for money!’ I emitted a tinkle of bell-like laughter, as they say in the best books. ‘I wouldn’t *charge* May. I would like, *we* would like,’ I added bringing Lizzie into this, ‘to be her friends, your friend too.’

Ah Yee looked doubtful, shaking her head. ‘Master not want May learn English ...’

‘Nonsense,’ I laughed, ‘of course he would. *May!*’ I called, sharpish.

She looked up, startled.

I walked over and took her hand. I smiled into the soft little eyes of a friendly mouse. ‘You want to learn English, right? English talk, you, me. No money. Free. You my friend. Elizabeth too your friend.’ I pointed my finger at her, at me, at Lizzie, at her, at me, waving my hand around as I prattled on. And do you know, I think she understood *something* of what I was trying to say.

She nodded her head like it would fall off. ‘Tleesa, *haiya haiya*, Tleesa!’

Ah Yee was still looking doubtful. May said something very fast in that little girl’s voice of hers. Ah Yee explained. ‘May want learn, you teach. Very well, but we no tell Master. He say he not like May learn English. I tell Beatrice no tell. No money, Miss Teresa, sorry.’

‘No money, no problem. But you do two things for us, then we all square.’ I swung my arms out either side. ‘Even. You write Chinese?’

She nodded.

‘You write a sign we put outside our house for business. Big sign, I place in my window. You write this?’

I produced a sheet of paper.

YOU WANT TO READ AND WRITE ENGLISH?

Miss Teresa Conway and Miss Elizabeth Wiggins are

CERTIFIED ENGLISH TEACHERS

For Further Information in re Costs of Tuition

APPLY WITHIN

She traced her finger along the lines of words, saying each word out loud and looking at me questioningly. I nodded; she’d understood.

I looked across at Lizzie. She was frowning and looking rather *tense*. She caught my eye and jerked her head towards the door. We’ve nearly finished, she’ll just have to boil it until we have finished this business, I said to myself.

I made an appointment to pick the sign up when Ah Yee and Beatrice were certain Old WS would not be around. (Love to tell them my nickname for the old bugger. I’m sure May would agree). Mid-morning any day after tomorrow, Ah Yee confirmed.

‘Now, the second thing you do for us ...’ I paused, allowing apprehension to waver in the air, ‘I teach English to May, she teach me Chinese!’

Ah Yee translated.

May bounced up and down in her chair, squealing ‘*haiyaa, haiyaa, haiyaa!*’

That meant ‘yes’ I presumed. Three times by the sound of it.

Negotiations concluded, Ah Yee tugged the tassel, Beatrice toddled in with the tea—which tasted more like lavender water than tea and it still looked like you

know what—and more of those bickie things. Then it was smile, smile as we took our leave.

Ah Yee might have been happy with our notice, but Lizzie was not. She'd seen me write the sign, and as she hadn't said anything at the time, I assumed she had agreed with the wording.

On the way home she let me know in no uncertain terms that she did not agree. Her problem a moment ago had not been that she had needed to pass water, as I had thought, but that until Ah Yee had read out the notice, she hadn't had the faintest notion of what it had said.

For Lizzie, our certified English teacher, was illiterate.

18

The same day

On the way back from May's we passed a house with a large verandah and a big square wooden arch out in front. It was at the end of the street leading to the Chinese quarter. I'd noticed this house before because of that unusual arch. Curious, I stepped onto the verandah, nodding to Lizzie to follow. The front entrance comprised two doors that were closed, along the sides and along the top of which were large Chinese characters in gold. I wondered what they meant. Walking round the side, we found an open door. Peeping inside, we could see lots of wall hangings, pictures and statues. Everything was brightly coloured, with a brilliant red predominating. I couldn't help thinking of May's wedding outfit.

'Cor, look at that Lizzie,' I whispered. 'Must be a temple or something.'

As my eyes got used to the gloom, I could see images of exotic animals and brilliant flowers embroidered on the hangings. They were beautiful! At the far end of the room was a table that looked like an altar, with vases and urns either side of a seated golden god—a fierce looking bugger—while on either side of him were even fiercer looking figures, like they were on guard. Not that the golden god looked like he needed much guarding. At one end of the altar was a big bowl full of little red flags with Chinese writing on each, while at the other was a bloody great sword, and on the floor beside it, a *rocking horse*! Fascinated, we slowly stepped further inside towards the god.

I suddenly felt distinctly *uncomfortable*; were we were being watched?

'Yeek!' Lizzie's squeak of alarm made me jump round.

A tall, sad looking monk in yellow robes and solemn dark eyes had materialised right beside us.

'Oh! 'Scuse us,' I babbled, 'we don't mean any harm or anything ... just looking ... so beautiful ...'

The monk clasped his hands in front of him and bowed. 'You are welcome. All are welcome to the temple of Kwan Ti. I am Master Mou.'

'Oh, er, I'm Miss Teresa Conway, and this is Miss Elizabeth Wiggins ...'

‘I know who you are.’

My word, thought I, news doesn’t half travel fast in Thomas Plains. Surely he can’t know *why* we’re here? But then, I thought again, that must have been obvious, us not yet having donned our disguise as teachers. I stared at him wondering what to say next. He nodded slightly towards what looked like a collection box. Maybe he expected a donation.

‘Lizzie, I think we’re expected to drop a coin in there.’

We fumbled for our purses. I found a sixpence, Lizzie pulled a wry face. ‘Only change I’ve got,’ she mouthed, dropping in a tinny little threepenny bit.

Master Mou nodded his thanks. He picked up a cylindrical box with sticks in it and handed it to me, saying, ‘You shake until a stick comes out, only one.’

I took the cylinder and giving it a good hard shake, *most* sticks rattled out onto the floor. Oh dear.

The monk sighed. ‘Pick them up. Give one to me.’

I did as he said.

He glanced at it. ‘*Gau*, nine,’ he murmured mournfully and picking up a scroll, he unwound it and started reading. He then said to me like it was a poem:

*‘To achieve what you came here to find,
Be pure in heart and be pure in mind.’*

Well, it’s a little late in the day to find *that* out now, I thought ruefully. He certainly does know we are on the game, and is telling me at any rate to stop it before I even start. What will he tell Lizzie?

Lizzie did better than me in that she did manage to shake only one stick out of the cylinder. And this was her jolly little poem:

*‘Beware, beware of a fallen tree,
Lest much harm will come to thee.’*

Master Mou, having despatched his joyful news to us both, bowed and retreated somewhere into the depths of his temple, while we stepped out into the bright sunshine. It lifted the sombre mood induced by the lugubrious Master. We both had the same thought.

‘Fiddlesticks, that’s what we’ve been playing,’ Lizzie opined. ‘And a waste of a good tray-bit.’

I agreed. ‘Fiddlesticks.’

19

Later still the same day

When Lizzie had unloaded that confession of illiteracy from off her ample chest, I realised how little we really knew of each other. When we arrived home, I suggested it was time we told each other our stories.

‘Too right, we should,’ she agreed, ‘and over a cuppa.’

That was easily arranged, with our new kettle constantly on the simmer on the hob. We settled at the table.

‘You first, Lizzie.’

Her dad was a ganger on the Launceston-to-Deloraine railway when he worked, which was only some of the time. He was also a drunkard and a bully, which was all the time. The family had to keep moving from house to house in Mowbray when money marked for the rent was spent on fine ales and spirits.

‘Midnight flits, each time. It was fuckin’ difficult for Mum, trying to carry stuff from one house to the next with a broken arm that wouldn’t set proper.’

I couldn’t help gaping at that. It wasn’t the reason why I was a whore, but I was beginning to see why Lizzie was.

‘The last time we did a flit was when Dad and Tom, he’s the eldest, tried to have a bit of fun with me. They were as full as farts. Fourteen I was and blood everywhere. Me own *dad* did it! I screamed blue bloody murder. Mum and Davo came rushing in and Dad sent ’er flying. Davo, he’s me other brother and a good’un, he got stuck into Dad. Tom was about to have his turn but he got stuck into Davo ...’ Lizzie paused. She was telling the story as if it were a joke, but her eyes were saying it was anything but. ‘Total fuckin’ chaos! Mum and I decided we’d ’ad enough. We’d do better on our own. We did our own flit that night, in the small hours when the rest of them was pissed rotten, dead to the world. We spent the night in City Park. Next day we found a tiny little cottage in Invermay. We’d lifted a few notes and some silver from Dad’s pockets and a note and some change from Tom’s. Kept things sweet for a while. But a pity about Davo, I miss ’im.’

‘How did you survive after that?’ As if I didn’t know the answer.

‘What do you think? I had no workin’ skills. With all the moving around I ’adn’t been at school long enough to learn to read and write proper. Mum only knew how to keep a drunken bastard happy, by cooking and fucking. Not that it kept my dad happy. But that’s what Mum said a girl had to do: cook and fuck and try to keep men happy. And apart from the cooking, I’m pretty good at the rest.’

That strange funny-sad expression on her face—lips smiling, eyes crying—prompted me to ask: ‘How did you feel when you had your first customer?’

‘Nervous. All I knew so far was that having that hard thing shoved between your legs hurt like bloody hell. Mum taught me to relax and use olive oil or butter. Me first was a young soldier, he was as nervous as I was. A nice lad, I still remember him. After that, you learn the tricks. Be really nice, clever with your hands, and with a bit of luck it’ll be over before it starts.’ She laughed. ‘That’s when I learned to tell them that I want the dibs before we get started, right? Otherwise they might bargain you down if they don’t get the real thing.’

‘But you know what my speciality is? Make ’em laugh! Tell ’em jokes. Makes me happier about it too. Nah, now I’m in control of things life’s not bad.’ She really did look happy with her lovely big grin. ‘But I’m not in control when I’m billed as a certified teacher of fuckin’ English. Yeah, I should be certified all right! Or someone should.’ She stared a mock challenge. ‘So that’s me. How about you?’

After what I’d just heard, I reckoned I’d come into the game the easy way, *comparatively* speaking that is to say.

‘Mum and Dad immigrated from England in 1875, when I was just six. Not sure why they came to Tassie. There was some funny business going on. I think he had a lot of debts back in London but they never said nothing much. Not to me they didn’t. They had just enough money to buy a little shop selling lollies and ices in Wapping, down by the Hobart wharves. Mum said they chose Wapping because it reminded them of London. And it was cheap. But they made enough to send me to dame school.’ Not being a skite, I left out how I loved school and went on to Hobart Ladies’ College—until Dad’s chickens came home to roost. I told her how when I’d just turned thirteen, Dad was declared bankrupt and tossed into gaol. I tried to smile

through my telling of the next bit. ‘Then Mum has to go and catch typhoid, doesn’t she? Got it from the Wapping sewers, they reckoned ...’ It was no use; it was my turn for the weepies. I pulled out my kerchief and dabbed my eyes, while Lizzie moved over and held my other hand. ‘Oh Lizzie, it’s coming back. I try never to think about that last time when I went to the hospital to see her. The nurse took me aside. “Your mum’s dead, love”, that’s what she said. And that left little Terry a ward of the state. The only memento of her I have is this.’

I unpinned my precious brooch and handed it to her: a face carved into pink coral, set on an oval of antique gold. ‘See, the coral is carved like it’s a face. I always say it’s Mum’s likeness, but it’s not really. I always wear it.’

After a minute of *sniffing*, I continued. ‘I was put into domestic service. After a year or so, the master of the house took an interest in little Terry. He wanted some real special service, late at night, when the rest of the house was asleep. Tell you what, Lizzie, I fell in love with him! Funny that. Maybe the loss of my own mum and dad made that possible. Anyway, I used to lie awake at night, waiting for him, waiting for the soft shuffle of his footstep outside my bedroom door.

‘No prizes for guessing what happened. His wife became suspicious. She followed him one night, and there we were, *in flagrante delicto* as the saying goes. She tossed me out, with enough screeching and yelling to wake the dead. Another guess what! As I was leaving, he slipped me an envelope. Back wages, he said. But it was more than what I was owed. I still remember what he wrote:

Teresa my sweetest darling girl,

One’s love for you is eternal. If you really love me in return, you shall go to a house called Lalla Rookh at 167 Macquarie Street. Just mention my name and they will allocate you a room where we shall be completely free and undisturbed. Wait for me! I shall come to you every day on which I am able.

There I can, in broad daylight, feast my eyes on your sweet body.

I shall see you want for nothing, my darling Teresa.

Your adoring Monty.

‘So what would any sensible girl in my position do? What he didn’t mention was that his weren’t the only eyes that would be doing some feasting. But that came later. At first it was exactly as Sir Montgomery Bartlett QC had said. Then he asked me to entertain a very special friend of his. “Entertain?” I asked, puzzled. Then I caught his drift. “You mean . . . make *love*, like you and I do?” Yes, that is what the bastard meant. He assured me that if I really loved him, really and truly, I would do that for him. The look on his face was so honest, so tender, I thought he must know best. So I did what he asked of me. Oh Lizzie, it felt so *wrong* doing with this stranger what had been so private and sweet between me and Monty. But he said he loved me all the more for it. Then there was another friend of his, then another. Each time he sang the same old tune: If I *really* loved him, I should be happy to do it. *And*, the slimy rat added, he’d give me *such* a nice present.’

‘Gawd! Did you still love him after that?’

‘Course not. It didn’t take long to work out that if a man really loves a girl, he’d *never* ask her to do that. Never! Just sixteen I was when I took what turned out to be my first customer, if only I’d known it. *Lalla Rookh* was a posh brothel of course, in which he had a financial interest. He was a lying, conniving *bludger*—and one of Hobart’s top lawyers.’

‘But didn’t the other girls give you the drum about what was really going on?’

‘We didn’t hardly speak to each other, not while I was exclusive to Monty. Not seriously anyway. I talked to them like I thought the mistress of a top lawyer *should* talk, but the other girls thought I was such a stuck-up little missee. They didn’t like me, see. They put on the dog for the customers, but amongst themselves they spoke like they was off the streets . . .’ I stopped and blushed.

But good old Lizzie only laughed. ‘Like me you mean?’

I hurried on. ‘Well, anyway, I was trapped. I could have walked out, but where to? Who’d employ a whore? “Where were you last employed, young lady? Your testimonials, if you please.”’ I quipped, putting on the gruff voice of a shop manager.

‘Blimey, so you stayed on there as his own private whore, did ya?’

‘Not his whore, but anyone else’s who had the dibs. After the first shock at being tricked, I concluded there was nowhere else to go, like I said. At least I didn’t need to worry about where the next penny was coming from. I lived in comfort. I even had fun myself, with some customers anyway. Take them boarders at that posh public school just a few doors up from *Lalla Rookh*, in Macquarie Street, Hutchins School it was called. You know, looks like a bloody great castle.’

‘Never been to Hobart,’ Lizzie said kind of wistfully.

It struck me I might have been sounding like I was skiting after all, my story being so different from hers, but I wasn’t, Hermione, really I wasn’t. And I was still feeling bad about my bloomer about the way she spoke. I decided I’d roughen my own speech a little more when talking to her.

‘No, it wasn’t as grand as it might sound. Now them schoolboys, my own age they were, used to sneak out of a night, two or three at a time, and bring some supper to me room. We had some fun, I can tell you. But I soon learned how good our “friendship” was. I asked them to take me out once in a while, like to the Theatre Royal or something. You know what? They laughed as if I’d made a joke. Fucking *laughed*. See me in the street and they’d cut me dead. Didn’t want to know me. See? The sort of toffs I dealt with at *Lalla Rookh* wouldn’t look twice at a whore even as a friend, let alone as marriage material.

‘No, Lizzie, what I really want is to find a good man and marry him. I’d never be able to do that in Hobart. Those Hutchins boys made that plain as a pikestaff, the bloody snobs. There’s them’s you fuck and there’s them’s you marry—that’s what the likes of all them so-called gents think. So I promised myself three years in *Lalla Rookh*, then I’d be off to somewhere where I wasn’t known. Now me three years are up, here I am in the North-East. I reckoned that a Chinaman might be a good catch. They make good money, they’re clean, hardworking and all—so they say—and not likely to be so fussy about what the neighbours think.’

I apologised to Lizzie for embarrassing her over the teacher thing, explaining that I thought Bertie’s idea of a respectable front was a good one, allowing us to be a bit choosy over our other business. But she still hadn’t said why she decided to come to Emu Flat. ‘And how about you? Are you here for a husband or the hoot?’

'Husband?' What I've seen of marriage ain't no recommendation, I can tell you. It's the hoot, of course. But, *if* I fell in love with a nice young feller and he with me, then, yes, I wouldn't say no to traipsin' down the aisle.'

'Someone like Pete, maybe?'

'Maybe,' she replied, with an expression that suggested much more than her words that our Lizzie was a love-hungry girl.

I got up from the table for something a little more special than tea and took down a bottle of port wine I'd bought for a special occasion.

'To us and marriage!' I raised my glass.

'Let's just say to fuckin' *us!*' Lizzie banged her glass against mine.

20

Wednesday the Eighteenth of September, 1889

This morning, I walked back to Anchor Street around ten. Tell you what, it's a long haul! I deliberately walked past Old WS's shop to let him see, *if* he was interested and *if* he was looking out into the street at that precise moment, that this new woman about town, who spent like she'd just struck pay dirt, was still around. It also afforded me the chance to check on his whereabouts. Beatrice said it was safe until noon. After which Old WS was wont to drop in for some hot dinner and whatever else, poor May.

Beatrice was all over me. 'Good morning, Miss Teresa, nice to see you again. Lovely day ain't it? I'll call the ladies. Ya knows where to go now don'tcha?'

Nice girl, but just as well her employers had no idea of her standard of English. My days in Hobart Ladies' College—and in *Lalla Rookh*, that fine finishing school for young ladies—had taught me a lot about impressing one's betters. I *proceeded* to the living room and sat down.

Ah Yee and May entered a moment later.

'Tleesa!' May squeaked, pitter-pattering up to me. Then she stopped, looking embarrassed. Poor thing, she didn't know what to *do*.

I stood. Taking her by the hands, I kissed her lightly on the side of each cheek, like posh people do. That seemed to settle the excitable child down.

I smiled graciously at Ah Yee—and we all took our seats.

'I have notice for you,' Ah Yee said. She left the room, returning with a large sheet of paper.

It looked good to me. At least, our names were in the squiggles where I thought our names should be, but how would I know? I would paste it inside the front window of our little domicile and see what happens.

But back to the English lesson. I thought I would talk to May just using English, so she would hear my accent and imitate it directly. I would feed her a word at a time, and then May could give me the Chinese back.

Ah Yee had other ideas. She wanted to translate for May, word for word. While I walked around the room touching objects, saying, 'chair', 'table', 'window', Ah Yee chanted 'yi', 'toi', 'cheung'. And of course dear little May repeated Ah Yee's Chinese! I'd be learning Chinese all right, but May would be learning bugger all.

'Ah Yee,' I said, 'it is better if you leave it to May to work out each word. Please do not say anything. Just listen.'

Her face closed into a stubborn mask, a flathead with indigestion. *Damn* her, but I couldn't afford to be on her wrong side. That could ruin everything. I had a burst of inspiration.

'Ah Yee, you know English. It would be better if *you* said the English. May understands you better than she understands me. Come.' I led her to the pots and shrubs.

'Start here.' I pointed to a bamboo.

'Bamboo,' she said.

'Bamboo,' repeated May, then added '*jook*', looking at me.

'*Jook*,' I repeated. 'Now this one,' said I to Ah Yee, pointing to the aspidistra.

Ah Yee faltered, blushing. 'Not know,' she muttered.

'Oh never mind,' I said, with such a *kind* smile, 'shall we try something else?'

By the end of the session, I was in charge again. Ah Yee and I at least were not enemies, even though we may not have been friends, but May and I were very good friends indeed.

And we were learning each other's language.

21

Thursday the Nineteenth of September, 1889

‘Well, well, if it ain’t my lucky day! Welcome to my humble hostelry, girls,’ Bertie Taylor bowed low ushering us in with a sweep of his right hand. ‘Now, what can I do for you?’

‘ ’alf a pint of ale,’ Lizzie said.

‘Port and lemon for me,’ I replied, dropping an extra shilling on the bar and smiling ever so sweetly. ‘And a drink for mine host. We’d like to ask him a few questions.’ We’d decided we ought to probe a little more deeply about this place and the way it worked, and who better to tell us than our convivial Bertie?

His face broke into a *most* pleasant grin. ‘Don’t mind if I do. Please, my Parlour Bar ...’ He indicated the single table in the corner. It was late morning and the bar was empty. He brought our drinks over and a stout for himself.

‘Tell us more about this part of the world, Bertie. I thought there’d be Chinamen everywhere, but we don’t seem to see very many outside of Emu Flat. I’ve never seen any here,’ I indicated the All Nations bar with a wag of my head.

‘Not during the week. They live in a string of camps all along the Weld River right up through the Cascade area, back of Derby. Another mob camp up the Blue Tier, that’s the mountain a few miles east of here.’ He bent his head in a general easterly direction. ‘The Liberator Mine’s got swarms of Chinamen up there, building bloody great long sluices, while the Anchor Mine is one of the biggest open cuts in the world, so they say, not so many Chinamen there but it has got a bloody great big water wheel, sixty-six feet in diameter. A whopper of a thing, it was driven by water piped all the way from St. Columba’s Falls,’ he paused and took a draught of stout, ‘and that was the trouble.’

I raised my eyebrows. ‘Trouble?’

‘Yairs,’ Bertie continued, ‘you see, the wheel holds ten tons of water per revolution. Even the St. Columba couldn’t keep that up day in, day out, wet season or dry. Silly buggers built it that big to power one hundred stamp batteries, far too

many. They closed it down two or three years ago but the wheel's still standing there. You oughta go up there and see it sometime.'

'What's a frigging stamp battery?' Lizzie asked.

'It's a machine that stamps, like fast bloody hammers in a row, to crush the rock that holds the tin ore.' Bertie demonstrated by banging two fists alternately on the table, nearly sending my drink flying.

'That'd make a hell of a din, wouldn't it?' I asked. 'There's neither sight nor sound of anything like that at Emu Flat.'

'Ah,' Bertie wagged his finger at me like a schoolmarm with her favourite pupil, 'clever little Terry. But there's *two* ways of tin mining, now, ain't there? Crushing the rock that contains the tin ore, cassiterite they call it, and washing the crushed rock away leaving the cassiterite behind. That's what they're still doing up on the Blue Tier but with smaller wheels and fewer hammers.'

Lizzie sighed audibly.

'Nearly finished, my dear, but you did ask now,' Bertie wagged a finger at her and turned to me. 'The other way is to retrieve the tin that's been washed naturally into the rivers, alluvial tin they call that. They wash that out with high pressure water pipes like at the Brisies mine at Derby or it needs some mug to pan it, like panning for gold. Too much like hard work for the Europeans, but the Chinks go at like rabbits in springtime. Emu Flat's alluvial, you see, as is Garibaldi, Moorina, Branxholm and all the mines on the river flats. And that's where all them Celestials hang out; they do all the hard yakka, yandying the tin by hand. They come flooding in here of a weekend, to gamble and smoke the poppy, type of thing. There's a big Chinese section of town, behind the Joss House ...'

'Oh yeah, we bin there,' Lizzie interrupted. 'Old Master Mou told us our fortunes. Or rather our misfortunes. Gawd, he can't half do with a bit of cheering up.'

'Yes, Bertie, why is he so damned *miserable*? He as good as told me to get off the game and stick to teaching.' I winked at Bertie to remind him of his brilliant idea.

‘Did he now? Hmmm,’ Bertie rubbed his chin. ‘Well, nobody really knows. Master Mou is not what you’d call a chatterbox. Bit of a scrub bull he is, keeps himself to himself, type of thing. But,’ he paused for effect, Bertie-fashion, ‘ever since young Robert Ah Foy killed himself after he’d murdered his wife...’

‘*Murdered?*’ Lizzie squawked.

‘Yairs, murdered,’ Bertie repeated smugly, ‘*and*, you’ll be interested in this little detail; young Robert built the house just down from where you’re living! Built it for his wife—a European she was. Trouble is she lived with her Mum in Derby and wouldn’t leave. So of a weekend Robert used to walk the seventeen miles to Derby to obtain his conjugal rights, you might say. Left Friday night late and arrived early Saturday morning. Now, I’ll tell you something funny for nothing.’ He stopped, took out his pipe and tobacco pouch, filled the stinking thing, lit it, tamped it down, and inhaled a lungful of shag smoke.

‘Haaa,’ he exhaled, ready now to proceed with his yarn. ‘Before he set out, young Robert—who was a teetotaller—used to come in here, to this very selfsame bar, and order two double whiskies.’ Bertie paused, the teacher again waiting for the class to spot the contradiction.

Lizzie bit. ‘Hey, if ’e didn’t drink why would ’e order whisky?’

Bertie smiled, satisfied. ‘Why? I’ll tell you for why. He’d take off his boots and pour a whisky into each boot before replacing them. He wore several pairs of woollen socks that soaked up the whisky just right. And apparently, by the time he’d walked through the bush to Derby he ’ad the happiest and sweetest smelling feet in the whole of the North-East. He reckoned ’e got the benefit of the grog through ’is feet! That’s as true as I’m sitting here.’

Bertie took a long contemplative pull at his pipe, thoughtfully exhaled over his shoulder, then continued. ‘This went on, oh, for months. The winter in ’87 was extra wet, which meant they could continue yandying for tin longer than usual. So of course Robert sold more bags than usual. A devoted husband, ’e thought he’d pay a surprise visit and share his good fortune with his pretty wife. Well, no prizes for guessing what happened next. Poor bastard found out they were on the game, the

two of them, mother and daughter. His wife was actually entertaining a customer when he arrived. Killed her on the spot he did, then himself.'

All very interesting, but I was confused. 'But what's Master Mou got to do with all this?'

'Well may you ask, Terry my dear, well may you ask. It so happened that soon after the murder, a mysterious woman made her appearance here. She's been back a few times since. No sooner than she alights from the Derby coach, she pops in here for a snort. Maybe it's Dutch courage, I don't know. Then after a couple of gins she pops out again—to the Joss House, so I bin told. There now, what do you think of that?'

'The rotten old bugger,' Lizzie snorted, 'e tells me to beware of trees, and Terry here to get off the game, when he's knocking off this woman!'

'I didn't say that, Lizzie, now did I? Nah, there's more to it than that. The old Master Mou strikes me—and I'm not a bad judge of character what with my experience behind the bar—as a decent sort of cove. He wouldn't judge people badly for the same sort of thing as he does himself. As I say, there's more to this than meets the eye.'

'So you reckon this mystery woman is Robert's mum-in-law?' Lizzie leaned forward, eyes shining. Mine were too—this was more interesting than bleeding stamp batteries!

'So in that case Robert's murdered wife was Master Mou's *daughter!*' I put in.

He raised his arms in an exaggerated shrug. 'Could be, ladies, could well be. But then again, maybe not. But one thing's for sure: she's not Master Mou's tart.

'My shout. Same again?'

22

Friday the Twenty-seventh of September, 1889

We had just finished tea when there was a knock on the door. It was about time we had a customer. There hadn't been any since Pete—if he counted as a customer. Not that I'm too certain about that now. Good working girls don't fall in love with their customers, and I do believe our Lizzie had.

I opened it, and standing there was the young miner from just down the road. Ha, thought I, if I'm going to start business, then this is the sort of customer for little Terry. He was tall, well built, nice deep brown eyes, tidy black hair fitting like a cap. As he entered, I noted appreciatively that he moved fluidly, like a boxer might move. But *nervous*, poor chap. He started to smile but then quickly dropped his eyes as if ashamed of his effrontery. Ah yes, he was my sort of customer alright, sweet and innocent. I reached for his hand to lead him into my bedroom, but it wasn't there. It was pointing to the sign in the window.

'Teach English,' said he sing-song, as if reciting from memory, 'how much pay?'

I'd thought of everything but the price of these lessons, if you can believe that. Obviously it could not be as much as if he'd come for the other business. Lizzie and I had at least talked about that. It was £1 minimum at *Lalla Rookh* – more for something on the *unusual* side – but I'd gathered from Bertie that these men probably only averaged around a pound clear a week, if that. Anyway, we agreed five bob would be the ticket for the usual, ten bob for something a little more specialised, and a quid for all night. All of which was negotiable.

But for an hour, just talking English, no touching, no intention of attaining the sublime—what might be the going rate for *that*? On the spur of the moment, I decided to settle for one bob. Lizzie's previous stab at a deener was too little.

'One shilling for one hour,' I said. I held up my index finger, walked to the clock on the wall that Bertie had donated, with some gentle persuasion, and traced an hour.

The new lad nodded. He sat at the table, plonking his scrubby hat right where we ate.

‘Tut tut,’ I said, picking it up. ‘Hat. Hang your hat on the hook by the door,’ I concluded, doing same. ‘Now you say.’

‘Tut tut, hat hang hook door. Hang hat in hook in door. What “tut tut” ah?’

Lizzie and I greeted this gibberish with a shout of laughter. Not what good teachers do, is it? I hoped we hadn’t offended him.

‘Very good! But I,’ pointing at me going through the motions again, ‘hang hat *on* the hook *by* the door.’ Point, point, point. I remembered a word I learned from May. ‘Tut tut means *m’duk*.’

‘*M’duk!*’ he repeated in tones of astonishment. His face told me he was thrilled to tiny little pieces that his teacher knew some Chinese. I was pretty thrilled too, come to think of it.

Slowly, enunciating with excruciating precision, I said: ‘This is my colleague, Miss Eliz-a-beth Wig-gins, she is a teach-er too. I,’ pointing at little me, ‘am Miss Te-re-sa Con-way. What is your name?’

‘Jack Yang.’ So he understood that much.

‘I am pleased to meet you, Jack. Do you mind if I call you Jack?’ Course he didn’t, I could tell by the look on his face. That is, if he understood that inch of more English.

Lizzie decided to leave the teaching to me. ‘Good-bye Jack, nice mee-tin’ ya.’

She went to her room and closed the door.

I pinned up a large sheet of paper with all the letters of the alphabet, small and capitals, written on it in my very best dame school copperplate. I had thought over my experience with May, and decided that it would be best to teach speaking, reading and writing all at the same time.

I handed Jack an exercise book and a pencil. ‘Now, I shall teach you to write what we have just said.’

His smattering of English helped and he was a smart fellow. We progressed a little further than hats and hooks and doors, and by the end of the session Jack could

write much of what we had said. At this rate, I thought, he'd be well on the way to literacy in a few months.

As Jack prepared to leave, it occurred to me he'd better take the exercise book and pencil with him so he could revise—an expense I hadn't considered. I'd have to charge extra for those. 'One pen-ny for the book and one pen-ny for the pen-cil.' I held up two fingers and pointed. 'You bring book and pen-cil next time. Do not for-get. To-mor-row, eh?'

Tomorrow. He didn't know that. I mimed going to sleep, pointing round the clock 24 hours. 'To-mor-row,' I repeated

'To-mor-row? Ah, *tingyat! Haiyaa, haiyaa,*' he beamed, digging into his pocket for a bob and couple of browners. He smiled so nicely when he dropped the loot into my hot little hand.

Soon as he'd departed, Lizzie re-emerged and while I was telling her she should join us in future so she could learn to read and write too—an instruction I saw immediately was taken the wrong way—there was another knock at the door.

It was Pete. Lizzie's.

They went straight to her room. After more than half an hour of animal noises, followed by low mumbled conversation, they returned to the land of living, that being the kitchen where I was sitting.

Business over, he made to walk off into the night, but Lizzie stopped him, 'Sit down, Pete. You listen to what he has to say, Terry.'

It turned out Pete's boss was an unhappy square Chinaman. He'd been diddled out of a cartload of fruit and veggies worth about £30 or more and Pete had been ordered to find the diddlers: an old Chinaman, name of Wu Ying, and a younger one called Ah Fung. But apparently Old WS wasn't the only one of the beddled. They had also included Hilary Allingham in their scheme, as she'd loudly explained to Old WS when he'd galloped into her shop, gibbering with outrage. But, as she had triumphantly explained to Old WS, at least *she* had been alert enough to press Wu Ying for the address of the market gardeners in Moorina who had supplied the goods. Old WS whereupon despatched Pete to said market gardeners post haste in his cart. And guess what? Those two had been diddled as well!

Upon hearing this tale, I immediately thought that of my brooch. Soon as I had arrived home last Wednesday, I'd noticed my treasured coral brooch, the only remaining memento of my dear Mum, was missing. I asked Lizzie about it, but she hadn't seen it.

'That old Chinaman you banged into the other day musta been this Wu Ying!' Lizzie cried, sharing my very own thoughts.

He'd not only nicked all those veggies, but my brooch too, the bastard!

Anyway, back to Pete. He was on his way back to Old WS to share the glad tidings that he was last in a long line of the bediddled. Pete, poor lad, was downhearted at being the bearer of such bad news. In fact, he was more than downhearted; he was *affrighted*. Old WS, he explained, would be pacing up and down breathing fire. If Pete returned without tracing the scoundrels that had caused such grievous discomfort, Old WS would have Pete's bollocks, finely shredded, with which to lace his wonton soup. So here was Pete, in need of some feminine cheer. And here we were, in the business of cheering up lusty young lads. Lizzie had done a bonzer job, judging from the initial grin on young Pete's face, but he was still worried.

'Jeez, I tell you what for nothin'. It was my fault in a way because I gave the older Chinese bugger a ride into town. He seemed a nice enough cove. I told him all about who did what and who was up who here in Thomas Plains. Bastard must have put it all together. Then he used me to get old Squarehead's confidence ...'

'Wombat Shit's,' I interrupted.

'Eh?' He howled with laughter. 'Squarehead's what I call him but I reckon your name's a pearler. *Wombat Shit!*' he gasped, then was quickly serious again. 'He'd kill me if he knew half of what I'd said to that cheating Chinese bastard. He seems to think I'm in it as well!'

Hmmm, thought I, maybe he was! After all, Pete did give this Wu Ying a ride and pass on some sensitive information. What, at a price? I looked hard at Pete and thought he could be stupid enough or greedy enough to have been involved. But this ungracious train of thought was derailed by Lizzie.

‘There, there,’ she murmured, getting up and standing behind his chair. She patted his face and kissed him on the top of his head. He reached behind the chair to feel her bum. Yes, innocent or guilty, Pete was clearly more than a customer.

I thought Lizzie would do well to be a little more *professional*, shall we say.

‘So if I can trace those two twisters, I’d be back in his good books.’

We promised Pete we’d try to help. I thought it might still my suspicions. But more importantly, it might help me get into Old WS’s good books and hopefully that would mean he’d be happy for me to visit to sweet little May teach her English. And maybe then she’d tell me what the ugly old bugger really did do to her on her wedding night. If anything. Nothing’s always a possibility at his age.

‘Yeah, we’ll do what we can, too right we will,’ agreed Lizzie. ‘Tell you what; no charge next time, if that’ll cheer you up.’

23

Saturday the Twenty-eighth of September, 1889

Jack had done a considerable amount of homework. How he managed to fit that in overnight spoke wonders for his enthusiasm. And no doubt too he'd been talking to his English-speaking mate. Anyway, half an hour or so into the next session, we were starting to hold real conversation—greetings, question and answer, that kind of thing.

Until then, Lizzie and I hadn't done anything about tracking down Wu Ying so Old WS's approval was yet to be gained. But it struck me halfway through the next lesson that Jack might know something. He and Wu Ying were both Chinese after all—even if there were only umpteen million of them. But it would be a long shot anyway, given that I had grave doubts our common English would be up to my trying to explain what had happened. But one could only try.

'Do you know two Chinamen living at Moorina,' hands waving in the air as translations, 'an old man called Wu Ying, a young man called Ah Fung?'

'Old, what "old" mean? Wu Ying? Moorina?' he shook his head. 'Ah Fung... FUNG!' he suddenly shouted. 'Hakka! "Ah Fung!" Hakka!'

'Whatta?'

Jack jumped up, excited. '*Haiya, haiya*, yes, yes. *Ngor ji*. I know. I know. Moorina! I tell Charlie.' He leapt out of the chair and out the door.

Lizzie poked her head into the room. 'And who, may one ask, is Charlie?'

Charlie, it transpired, was the man with whom Jack shared poor Robert's house down the road. A minute later, Jack reappeared with Charlie.

We learned that there was a Hakka, a variety of Chinaman it seemed, who was on the boat that brought them to Tasmania. Said Hakka went to Moorina with a younger man, another Hakka, whom he addressed as 'Ah Fung'. Wu Ying was evidently the older man who was behind all this thievery, and who, for some particular reason I had yet to uncover, Jack hated with a passion. Whatever Jack's reasons for that, Wu Ying was by any account an 'orrible piece of work; 'orrible,

with a capital haitch. I could vouch for that myself because he must have swiped my brooch when he bumped into me outside Ah Chee's store.

Tomorrow is Sunday, and while the Chinese often work on the Sabbath, Jack and Charlie do not intend to work. They want to go to Moorina in order to apprehend this scoundrel.

When we insisted on going with them, Jack started jumping up and down, emitting what sounded like negatives.

'No, Miss Teresa, I agree with Jack,' said Charlie, politely but firmly, 'this Wu Ying is dangerous man. You not go. Not suitable for woman. This is man work.'

'The more people you have to help search for Pete the better. Anyway, I have a stake in this too. This Wu Ying stole my brooch. I am *going*,' I said in a voice that brooked no argument.

'And so am I,' averred Lizzie in like tones. 'And so is Pete. Moorina's a good seven mile or so up the road, and 'e has a horse and cart. That will be a great 'elp. Anyway, he's in this more than anyone.'

'So that's it, gentlemen. We are all going.' I concluded.

**DISCORDANT NOTES EMITTED FROM
FOUR PLUCKED STRINGS**

24

During the march from Boobyalla, Wu Ying learned, by eavesdropping on conversations, how rich were the tin lodes in the Briseis Mine at Derby, but that Chinese were not allowed to obtain work in Derby's mines. Wu Ying was perfectly happy with that as he had no intention of mining, but he did draw the agreeable conclusion that Derby must therefore contain a number of rich white miners. He was unsure as yet how he could fasten onto their money, but like his one-time idol, Hong Xiu Quan, the Heavenly King, Wu Ying too took guidance as to how to act in complex situations by drawing on the ancient maxims. In this instance, Wu Ying recalled *bai wei bu ru yi jian* (only when you see the mountain can you paint it). The message was clear: he must go to Derby, where he would observe very carefully whatever presented itself before making any plans. But whatever those plans might be, he thought an accomplice—his own foot soldier—would widen his options.

Wu Ying was walking on the march from Boobyalla in the company of Ah Fung, the young Hakka he'd met on the boat. Ah Fung was of solid, peasant build, a seemingly biddable young man. He listened attentively to everything Wu Ying told him; he was easily persuaded that tin mining was a fool's game.

'What you have said makes sense to me, Wu Ying. But what else do you think I could do in Tasmania?'

'That depends on your skills, and on your capital. I myself intend to start a business.'

'I have some money,' Ah Fung said quickly. 'What sort of business do you have in mind?'

'Ah, that depends on what offers.' Wu Ying looked at Ah Fung as if he was assessing something about him, possibly his weight. 'You have some money, you say?'

'My life savings, I am not sure what they are worth in pounds. Perhaps you could tell me.' He pulled off his shirt and unwrapped a cloth from around his waist. 'Here.'

‘Ah yes,’ Wu Ying looked expertly at the crumpled, grubby notes and holed coins. About fifteen pounds’ worth, he noted with pleased surprise. But he informed his companion, ‘Five pounds, possibly. Not much, but if you let me take care of it, I will exchange it for you. With my English, I will obtain a better deal than would you. But yes, with your money and mine, I think we could start a comfortable little business.’

He had found his foot soldier.

Wu Ying cast his mind back to his army days, whereupon the strategy *sheng dong ji xi* (feint to the east, attack from the west) struck him as the obvious one to use at this juncture. It was known he was going to Moorina, and here he was intending to enact that very same strategy: he had already decided he would go westwards to Derby. Such a confluence of advice was greatly reassuring. He looked carefully around before drawing Ah Fung aside and whispered urgently into his ear: ‘But not in Moorina, which is where we are supposed to be going. *We shall keep walking until we reach Derby!* I have a plan.’

His plan was basic. After arriving in Derby, he would convert Ah Fung’s money into usable currency, returning five pounds of the amount to Ah Fung. Then, as would any good fly, he’d alight on the largest rubbish heap, there to attune his nostrils to the wafting breezes and follow the richest smells.

As it turned out, the Bank of Van Diemen’s Land in Derby gave Wu Ying a better rate of exchange than he had expected, so it was a contented fly who sat in the taverns, nursing a pint of ale with which he wet his lips occasionally, eavesdropping on the white miners. Beside him sat the admiring Ah Fung, who drank less sparingly, perhaps celebrating his good fortune and thanking the gods for sending this brilliant man to be his guardian.

Wu Ying found that gold mining was a constant topic of conversation, which he thought unusual considering these were tin miners. That made him pay close attention. He panned all their words and phrases to see what heavier and richer information might settle at the bottom of his mind.

Two nominations settled in close enough proximity to suggest a possible connection: ‘Nine Mile Springs’ and ‘salting’. The men constantly talked about the

riches being dug from underground at Nine Mile Springs, a town well to the west of Derby. Salting a mine was achieved by placing gold dust in strategic locations in an otherwise dud site, thus luring the careless to buy what was technically known as a duffer, instead of a potentially productive gold mine. This was an operation that appealed to Wu Ying immediately. It was an offspring of *zhi she wei yu* (pointing to a snake and calling it a fish). The salting the Derby miners had been discussing had actually occurred at Waterhouse, north of Scottsdale, but Wu Ying's agile brain saw the possibilities of running a similar scheme at this Nine Mile Springs the miners had been talking about.

Accordingly, with the money he and Ah Fung now shared, Wu Ying purchased gold dust in Derby before they set out. They would use the dust judiciously, but in amounts sufficient to convey the impression to the unwary that the lot Wu Ying would be selling was as rich and productive as any in the Nine Mile Springs goldfields.

However, salting gold mines in a productive area was more complicated than Wu Ying had thought at first. The first mine they had bought, salted and resold, had netted them a profit, if not as large as Wu Ying had expected.

But their second mine had turned out to be highly productive after Wu Ying had sold it, a turnaround that had enraged him mightily. That second mine had yielded several hundred pounds' worth of gold within months, manifesting every sign of continuing such production for years to come. And he had sold it for a mere £50—and from that he had to deduct the original cost of the site. Yet even that cloud had had a silver, if not a golden, lining—the reputations in Nine Mile Springs of Mr. Ying and Mr. Ah Fung as honest brokers had quickly spread, and business was brisk for a while. But there is a natural termination to this line of business. Duffers can be sold for only so long. Wu Ying's enthusiasm for calling snakes fish had caused him to exceed that sensitive period.

Early one morning, the local policeman appeared outside their tent.

'I want a word with you two,' he announced through the tent flap.

Wu Ying stepped outside, horrified to discover that standing behind the policeman were their last three customers, their eyes diamonds, their jaws set in quartz, their arms dolerite columns spanning chests of granite outcrops.

'I worked that so-called fuckin' lode for weeks for two bob's worth of gold dust,' one said menacingly, stepping towards the tent.

'Sold me a duffer too,' another growled, moving towards Wu Ying, his fist raised.

'Now, boys, you know I can't allow any rough stuff in my, er, *presence*.' The policeman warned, looking meaningfully at the others with a sportive glint in his eyes. 'So let's first hear what these two *gents* have to say for themselves, eh?'

Wu Ying put on his best English. 'Of course, officer, but the charges of these misguidedly hasty ex-clients of mine will have to be proven. I am perfectly happy to assist in any way I can. But really, the fact that they were unable to find gold can surely be put down to their lack of mining skills. Plus a touch of bad luck too, of course,' he added generously. The rumble that this produced led him hastily to continue: 'You must all be aware that one mine I sold is continuing to be highly productive.'

'Yeah, you slipped up there, didn't ya, Chinkie?' the third miner called.

The policeman held up his hands for calm. He turned to the two Chinese. 'Listen you two, I don't have time to muck around, and I can't control these men for much longer. Empty out your pockets, and show me where you keep your money and any remaining gold dust. And then you have one hour to leave town. I don't care where you go. Just don't show your ugly faces at Nine Mile Springs again.'

It was a hot day, yet Wu Ying insisted on wearing his heavy coat over his trademark faded blue shirt and trousers as they trudged out of town, towards Pipers River.

25

A few years before Wu Ying's ill-fated operation at Nine Mile Springs, there had been a gold rush in Lisle, near Nabowla, on the Lilydale Road to Scottsdale. This particular reef turned out to be short lived, but in the surrounding area at Panama Creek and the Denison River, there were frequent and continuing strikes.

Wu Ying had learned this information at Nine Mile Springs, eavesdropping on the conversation of others, as was his wont. After the Nine Mile Springs disaster—which would have become a catastrophe had the policeman paid more attention to Wu Ying's attire as he saw them off—Wu Ying regurgitated this information about Lisle. He sought the appropriate maxim that would tell him how to make their next move.

'You see, you have to obtain the correct balance,' he explained to Ah Fung as they trod the dusty road that would in the event take them through the Lisle district. 'We were mistaken in operating within an area that was still highly productive. Naturally, our purchasers would expect their lots to continue to be productive. Now in Lisle, we have a totally different situation. Once a highly productive area, Lisle offers the *appearance* of being worked out. In the surrounding district, however, there are new strikes almost every day. So, my young friend, if you were to purchase a lot with the intention of mining it, where would you buy: in Lisle itself, or in the surrounding district?'

'In the surrounding district, of course,' Ah Fung replied.

Wu Ying shook his head, smiling. 'No. That is precisely what *not* to do! Everyone is buying there. Remember that *feng huang sheng yu hui, bu sheng yu qing cao* (the phoenix rises from ashes, not from green grass). So consider again. Where would you buy if you wanted to surprise the enemy and thereby make a lot of money?'

'Er, Lisle?'

'You are indeed a bright young lad! Exactly. As a potential purchaser, when you hear of a new strike back in Lisle—and we produce the very evidence of such a strike—you would naturally recall all those other mines that were once rich but

thought to be exhausted. The Waterhouse mines are an excellent example of the ascension of such a phoenix—they became rich again. So given all this, you would of course be more inclined to buy back into an established mine. Therefore Lisle is where we recommence operations.’

‘But wasn’t Waterhouse where a couple of men were gaoled for salting a mine?’

‘That is completely different, you silly fellow. We are not so stupid as to be apprehended by the law. Our mistake at Nine Mile Springs was in failing to pay due heed to the ancient proverb: *jiao she yi ji*.’ On seeing blank incomprehension on Ah Fung’s face, Wu Ying continued, ‘You surely must have heard that jewel of wisdom?’

Ah Fung, faithful hound, gazed back at his master, mouth agape, shaking his head slowly.

‘No? Well, let me tell you. It instructs us that the cunning snake strikes but once. Remember that, Ah Fung, and we cannot fail. At Lisle, we strike just once but to deadly effect; then we leave immediately.’

The Lisle operation didn’t fail as Nine Mile Springs had failed. It didn’t start.

Wu Ying and Ah Fung bought a promising looking site, salted it—and waited. Nothing happened, for two whole months. Then one day, a miner, on his way through Lisle to Panama Creek, took one look at their sign and laughed loudly. He explained his mirth to the two disconsolate Chinese. ‘You’re wasting your time. Everyone knows there’s no point in even specking here. There never was no reef here, mate, only bits of quartz that’d been washed downriver. All *that* was worked out long ago. If I were you two, I’d get a teaspoon, dig out your salt, and clear off. But then if I were you, I wouldn’t have bothered in the first place. Ooroo.’

He gave them a friendly wave, adding as he left: ‘Oh, and by the way, don’t worry. I won’t turn dog on youse. You’re not doing no-one no harm, not here you ain’t, ha ha.’

Ah Fung arrived at the sad conclusion that his association with Wu Ying had not been very fruitful and seemed unlikely to become more so in the future. He

informed Wu Ying that he would be returning to Moorina to sign on in the tin mines, as was his original intention.

Wu Ying for his part had to admit they hadn't grown fat nibbling at the fringes of gold mining. He consoled himself by blaming failure on a lack of specialised *local* knowledge. However, unlike Ah Fung, his intention to remain disengaged from tin mining still held. For want of anything better, he decided to keep Ah Fung company on his journey back to Moorina, hoping that he had misjudged the potential of that pleasant town.

On the way, Wu Ying pondered another of his favoured army strategies, *yun chou wei wo* (set up a headquarters and plan correct strategies for operations against the enemy). Such a headquarters would have to be *central* to the operations, he decided. When they passed through Scottsdale, he bought a local map that he studied intensively. What he saw struck him like a shaft of lightning: *Moorina was the centre of a large region!*

Wu Ying reasoned, as he studied the map with mounting excitement, that the hypothetical enemy, whether Chinese or European, would be located within that tilted equilateral triangle defined by Thomas Plains at the eastern corner, Pioneer and possibly even distant Mt. Cameron at the northern corner, and Branxholm at the western corner. Moorina, at the centre of this great triangle, was the obvious headquarters for his new Fly-style operations! The problem with salting mines was precisely that you were located in one fixed situation, with no flexibility and no room for planning correct strategies. He needed to find somewhere with room to move. It seemed that Moorina would offer him exactly that, allowing him to control a range of operations over a large and potentially rich area.

Meanwhile, Ah Fung took a more straightforward strategy to ensure that body and soul were maintained in working order: he signed on with a local tin mining company. But despite everything, he still seemed to hold Wu Ying in some awe. He saw him as his hero, flawed to be sure, but his hero nonetheless. He offered him some space in his modest little hut, and was flattered that Wu Ying accepted so readily.

Wu Ying was happy to have a base in Moorina at no cost to himself. He spent some time mixing with the locals, seeing who was who in the order of things, and where they lived. His military training had told him: *jiao tu san ku* (the cunning rabbit has three burrows). Wu Ying thought that three burrows might be a little excessive, but a clever Fly would certainly need two. Ah Fung's hut could serve as one such burrow, but only for casual reconnoitre. He needed at least one other for his central headquarters. Wu Ying carefully scouted the neighbourhood around Moorina for such a burrow, the whereabouts of which even his faithful foot soldier Ah Fung would remain ignorant.

After a week, he found it—and it was, literally, a burrow. In the foothills of the range that further east became the Blue Tier, Wu Ying found a cave, overlooking the approaches from Frome Road and Garibaldi Road, but itself hidden by bushes. Immediately below the cave was a deep gully. It was perfect for his headquarters. Wu Ying felled a sturdy, straight, young stringy-bark so that it spanned the divide. Lo and behold, he had created a footbridge to his own unassailable castle. Another maxim leapt to mind: *guo he chai qiao* (dismantle the bridge after crossing it). This maxim was not meant to be taken literally, but Wu Ying thought it's literal interpretation was so appropriate that it confirmed to him that his plan was the right one. He thanked the gods in whom he did not believe and looked carefully around him.

Two trees stood on opposite sides of the gully. Each tree had a fork at exactly the same height. When Wu Ying was returning to his burrow from a fruitful operation, it would be the work of seconds to lift one end of his bridge into the fork on the path side. Then, when he had crossed the gully, he would lift the other end of his bridge into the fork on the cave side. He was set. Whether he was home or not, no passer-by would ever imagine that such a casual seeming fall-out from Mother Nature was in fact a serviceable bridge across the gully; that on the other side lay the headquarters of the cunning Fly, who at any given moment might be ensconced therein, planning unimaginably complex and lucrative operations. Not that Wu Ying had yet decided what the next operation would be.

Sp for the next two weeks Wu Ying was on the constant lookout for cracked eggs that would be vulnerable to the attack of a fly. One afternoon, after returning to Moorina, he saw two men walking along, Chinese style, carrying poles lengthwise on one shoulder, a large basket at the end of each pole. The front man had his pole and baskets on his left shoulder, the other behind, his pole and baskets on his right shoulder, his left hand on the leading man's shoulder. The trailing man was clearly blind.

Here was Wu Ying's cracked egg—and it was a double-yolker.

26

Wu Ying followed the blind man and his guide to the mining camp. It was late afternoon and the miners were cleaning up after a day's hard graft. The two men stopped, setting their baskets on the ground. All four baskets were filled to the brim with fruit and vegetables.

'Henry, Bing, what have you today ah?' the miners called. There was chattering, bargaining, and in no time all the produce was sold. The two hawkers hoisted their empty baskets and set off towards the river.

Wu Ying followed them. They led him to a flat area beside the Ringarooma River. What a delight to the eye lay before him! Rows and rows of young vegetables on large rectangles of rich, dark chocolate soil formed a vision of plenitude. Deep trenches separated the beds and sluice gates at the river end leading to an old water race had been adapted to irrigate their produce. Carrots, beans, peas, onions, spring onions, turnips, potatoes, spinach, lettuce, cabbage, parsnips, *pak choy*, *bor choy*, *fu gwa*, *ngai gwa*, *gai lan*, *lart diu* ... and the fruit trees: apple, pear, peach, plum, apricot ... It must have taken *years* to establish all this, Wu Ying joyfully concluded.

A large egg with very discernible cracks, Wu Ying decided. A double-yolker indeed!

He stepped forward, bowing low. 'Greetings, friends. My name is Wu Ying and I have recently arrived here. I am fascinated by your wonderful garden! It is magnificent!'

'Thank you,' the sighted man answered. 'My name is Henry Tse and my companion is Ah Bing. You are new you say? Perhaps you would like to drink some wine with us? Good rice wine, *mai jau*, we import specially from Canton.'

'I am honoured to accept, and delighted.' Wu Ying was truly delighted. This egg was actually begging him to alight upon it!

He learned that Henry and Bing had met on the vessel bringing them from Canton to Sydney before Bing's blindness. They became fast friends. From Sydney they headed for Lambing Flat to make their fortune.

They, along with hundreds of other Chinese, did moderately well until tragedy struck. Henry and Bing were not only Chinese, which to some was damning enough in itself, but the rough Australian diggers sniffed out with their sensitive noses that the friendship between these two was rather more tender than was usually the case between two cobblers, even allowing that they were Celestials. Wu Ying too had already noted the way Henry and Bing addressed each other, touching not only when they were in conversation but also when they were not. What happened was easy to imagine. Whenever the local lads of Lambing Flat felt like a bit of fun of a Saturday night, they affirmed their own normality by seeking out those who fell beyond their definition of that state and gave them a friendly roughing up.

On one such occasion, Bing suffered a kick to the head that damaged his eyesight so much he became totally blind. Mining was out of the question for him, and thus for Henry. Their fellow countrymen took pity on them, and worked out a means by which they could contribute to the community. Many miners had little vegetable gardens around their tents, the tending of which not a few found to be a chore. They would have preferred to spend that precious time in mining, not in gardening. The community agreed that if Henry and Bing took over the production and distribution of vegetables for the settlement, a task that one pair of eyes between the two of them would suffice, everyone would be better off. It was a generous idea and a successful one.

When mining at Lambing Flat had finally ceased, Henry and Bing trekked southwards, ending up at Moorina. They established their garden, gradually bringing it to its present richness. For several years, they had supplied fruit and vegetables around the district. But they did this the hard way. They loaded their baskets and walked to Herrick, to Pioneer and to Garibaldi, establishing a large and grateful clientele, of Chinese and of Europeans alike.

‘But we are not getting any younger, Ah Ying. Growing the vegetables is not difficult, but all that walking is becoming so,’ Henry sighed.

‘I think I can help you,’ Wu Ying murmured.

His fly's nose had unerringly sniffed the crack of opportunity on this very fine egg, but exactly how he could realise that opportunity by appearing to help these two pansies, he had at that precise moment little idea.

27

Ah Fung had been working in the mine for several weeks. He hated it. His back was sore, his arms sunburned, his hands cracked and peeling from sun and continuous immersion in water, and he wasn't making as much money as he thought he would. Fortunately, he had carefully not put all his money into the Lisle operation but kept it to himself without telling Wu Ying; he still had a little stock pile. Not that his deception mattered. Wu Ying knew with accuracy how much Ah Fung was withholding from their common wealth.

Instead of a sword, as in days of yore, Wu Ying now wielded an abacus as his favoured weapon. This was a beautiful piece of work, neat and compact, made of silver with gold inlay and silver beads. He had pickpocketed it on the *Sorell* and used it to calculate everything that he might turn to his advantage, which included his and Ah Fung's spending.

'Ah Fung,' Wu Ying said kindly one morning, laying his hand on the youth's shoulder with a sigh, 'I am indeed sorry that you find mining so difficult. But that is what I told you originally, is it not? Never mind. I have a much better proposition to place before you. It will allow you to use your sharp business acumen in a way that mining does not. Not only that, but you will find it physically quite undemanding.'

The lad looked at Wu Ying, his eyes shining once again with trust, love even, for his mentor.

'Now, pay close attention. I admit we were hasty about salting mines. Yes, I admit it! But the operation I have in mind is different entirely. In the countryside here, transportation is the biggest problem, right? People will pay good money to acquire the services of a strong young man with a large cart and a strong young horse to pull it. I have made enquiries about what is involved and I am prepared to help you! All you need do is buy a horse and cart.'

'A horse and cart!' Ah Fung echoed, his mouth agape.

'Forgive me, but I know you can afford it. I am not a fool,' he added, with a knowing laugh.

Wu Ying gave this next operation a title as splendid as the conception itself: *bu xie zhi yin yuan yu san xian* (Discordant Notes Emitted from Three Plucked Strings). He was pleased with his aesthetic approach to this particular operation. Having named his brainchild, his next move was to reconnoitre Thomas Plains. That, it seemed, would be the most promising place to locate his next operation.

He bought some high quality vellum parchment from the General Store in Moorina. He had no need to buy a pen—in the streets of Melbourne he had pickpocketed a rather splendid John Holland fountain pen—but he did need to buy quality ink, which he duly did. Sitting at the little table in the incongruous surroundings of Ah Fung's dilapidated hut, he sat down and began writing with extreme care.

That completed, he arose early next morning and returned to Henry and Bing's garden in the predawn blush, before Henry and Bing were awake. He could just see enough to find his way to the sluice gates that fed their irrigation channels. In the dim light, Wu Ying removed the gate supports—and broke them. He then replaced them carefully, so that they would remain unnoticed before the two left to market their goods in the morning. By the time they returned in the evening, however, Henry would definitely notice something. A section of their garden would be waterlogged. Not enough to do much real damage, but enough to issue a warning, to disturb them. That was the important thing.

The next stage of operation 'Discordant Notes' required Wu Ying's presence in Thomas Plains. As Ah Fung had yet to buy his horse and cart, Wu Ying had to walk there. With a sigh, he set out along the road. A young lad with ginger hair, sitting on a horse and cart, passed him a couple of miles from Moorina. He called out: 'Going far?'

'Thomas Plains,' Wu Ying replied, surprised that a white youth would offer a Chinaman a ride.

'Well mate, it's your lucky day. That's exactly where I'm heading. Wanna ride?'

Of course he did. Furthermore, here was a chance to obtain some local knowledge. He was up beside the lad before the cart had even stopped.

‘Thank you. You are so kind.’ Wu Ying was proud of his English. He liked showing it off, especially to those using a version of English that belonged to a lower class of user than the version Wu Ying himself attempted to use.

The lad chattered cheerfully in his vulgar dialect. ‘Me boss is a fuckin’ Celestial too. Mr. Ah Chee. Know him?’

‘I fear I do not. I am new here.’

‘Oh, but you must know *him*, surely to gawd. He’s one of the biggest suppliers of fruit and veggies hereabouts to you Chinamen. I deliver for ’im. Just on me way back from Branhholm. Been on the road for hours, I have. Glad to ’ave some company. Name’s Pete. Pete Jackson.’

Wu Ying had thrown a six. On the road, swaying round corners, lurching into potholes, scrunching over loose stones and gravel, he listened and he learned. He learned in particular that one of the main suppliers of foodstuffs for the Europeans in his campaign triangle was an easy-going drunkard called Fred Allingham. Fred spent much of his time in the bar of the All Nations Hotel, leaving his wife, the astute but long-suffering Hilary, in charge of the business.

What she didn’t know, Pete related with a wink, was that Fred didn’t spend all his time at the bar. He also owned another establishment, in which he had placed a trio of strumpets, including Louisa Price, a dark-haired Welsh lass who over a year ago had endeavoured to establish her own business in the All Nations Hotel itself, to the wrath of Mrs. Taylor, wife of the proprietor, Albert Taylor. In her present locale, Louisa and her fellow whores entertained Fred and a select clientele comprising the wealthier of his friends. However, Louisa and the girls were entrepreneurial enough to extend their clientele, including Pete himself, as Pete reported with pride. Fred did not interfere with the enterprise of his working girls—he collected commissions from them—but he did insist on absolute discretion. Fred’s wife Hilary was *never* to know anything about this, Fred had explained to Louisa and the other girls. And as Louisa had explained to Pete, her livelihood would be at stake if Pete ever blabbed his knowledge. He must promise to keep his mouth firmly shut on this matter, as Pete was now explaining to Wu Ying.

‘Tellin’ you is different but,’ Pete added, as a gleam of irony appeared in Wu Ying’s eye. ‘Like you’re a stranger and don’t know nobody, like ya just said. Nah, the old Louisa and I are great mates. I reckon we might tie the knot one fine day, me and her, but *after* she’s made her mint, ha ha. Mind you, me Dad wouldn’t ’old with that, but bugger ’im, a bloke’s gotta live his own life when all’s said and done. Meantime, she lives her life and I live mine. Know what I mean?’

Wu Ying knew what he meant, but was not interested in Pete’s sordid plans. What was of vast interest, and of much significance for his emerging operation, was that the proceeds from Fred’s sideline must more than make up for any losses caused by Fred’s neglect of his legitimate business. Wu Ying could hardly believe his luck in striking such a rich lode of information so soon. He felt vindicated.

Here was a Fourth String, from which an additional and very loud Discordant Note could be plucked, thus adding richly to the cacophony.

28

Hilary Allingham's dislike when the dark Chinaman with the drooping thin moustache, untidy grey hair and slimy smile entered her shop was all too evident. It was unlike her to dislike a Chinaman on sight. She usually welcomed them as they always paid on the dot, but this Chow in the dirty blue rig-out stirred different feelings in her spare and suspicious breast.

'Mrs. Allingham?' he asked in better English than most, 'can you spare a moment? My name is Wu Ying, and I have very good contacts with my Chinese compatriots all through the North-East. I have a proposition for you.'

'Oh yes, Mr. Ying, and what might your proposition be?'

'I understand that your business is mostly with the Europeans but that, well, perhaps there could be room for, er, more business?'

'There's always room for more business, Mr. Ying.'

'Yes, of course, but with Chinese miners, Mrs. Allingham?'

'Possibly, but that's Mr. Ah Chee's territory. We have an unspoken agreement between us. Nothing official of course.'

Wu Ying cleared his throat. 'Ah, that is the problem. I fear Mr. Ah Chee may, er, be experiencing some troubles.'

'Troubles? Well I never. First I ever heard tell of *that*.'

'Yes, delivery arrangements. Now, the Chinese miners in Garibaldi, Mount Cameron and Branxholm are very anxious to have fresh vegetables.'

'Really? I thought them Chinkies, oh sorry Mr. Ying, the Chinese I mean, mostly grow their own veggies. Why ...?'

Wu Ying only smiled when he might reasonably have been offended, causing her to frown with increased distrust.

'Oh no, not any more. They are doing so well at mining they cannot afford the time to tend gardens. No, now they have the money, many would prefer to buy their produce rather than to grow it. Now,' he went on in an abrupt business-like tone, 'I can arrange all this, including the transport which might otherwise be a problem, and more important, the contacts. I have an arrangement with a market

garden that could supply the very best and freshest fruit and vegetables in the North-East.'

'And where might that market garden be?' she asked suspiciously.

'Right in the centre of the area. Moorina.'

'Where in Moorina?'

He seemed to hesitate, but then he smiled. 'North of Krushka's Bridge and upriver half a mile. Now, here is my proposition.'

With an elaborate gesture, he produced from the folds of his coat an official looking roll of parchment, and with another gesture, a fine John Holland fountain pen, the like of which Hilary had never in her life seen before.

'Now, see here Mrs. Allingham. This is a contract, with some blank spaces for our joint signatures and for details as to price. I propose to sell you my vegetables, and I also guarantee to sell them on your behalf at a high margin of profit. I myself keep whatever I can obtain above that amount.'

The cloud of suspicion on her brow began to darken.

Wu Ying hurried on. 'Let us say, for example, that you pay me twenty pounds for the vegetables ...'

'*Twenty pounds?*' she interrupted. 'Twenty pounds sight *unseen*? You show me the goods first, my Celestial friend. No, you deliver them right here if you say you have the transport. Then, and only then, might we talk about how much they may fetch and how much I might pay.'

Wu Ying had debated his opening line. Should he have asked to speak to her husband first, as formality would dictate? Or, knowing that Fred wasn't in fact in charge of affairs (but well in charge of other affairs), would she be more flattered if he simply assumed she was the boss? He decided on the latter approach but was finding Hilary more intractable than he had expected. Her bristling at twenty pounds, a figure he had indeed plucked from the air, nevertheless gave him an idea of the sort of figure she might agree to if he played his cards correctly. He smiled to himself, confident in the belief that he would.

‘Yes, of course. I mentioned a figure merely to illustrate my point. Now see here,’ he flattened the parchment on her counter, ‘this is a legally binding document, as long as both parties sign and put up a consideration.’

Wu Ying was proud of his dim knowledge of Australian law, incorrect though it was. ‘We, you and I, have simply to agree on a selling price and the consideration. That completed, I do all the hard work of selling the produce—and I return with your guaranteed selling price. If I am able to exceed that in my dealings with the customers, that is my good fortune. If not, then alas, I will have learned to be less generous in future.’

‘But you, Mrs. Allingham, cannot fail. You are guaranteed a profit of, er, in the vicinity of one hundred per centum, I should say.’ Wu Ying then made as if to depart, carefully folding the parchment up. ‘Oh, and of course you would retain the original contract,’ he had held up the document, ‘for safe-keeping.’

He noted the irises of Hilary’s eyes expand and shine, which told him more than did the caution in her voice. ‘Now just a minute, Mr. Ying, why don’t you just sell all the vegetables yourself? You say you have the transport and the contacts ...?’

She’d spotted the weakness that he’d overlooked. He cursed silently, but his street skills had not deserted him. ‘Why the *goodwill*, of course! I am very happy to do this for Allingham’s, the most respected firm in the North-East. With my contacts and local knowledge, I could obtain a higher price from the miners than you ever could, so pray do not fret on my behalf! I shall do alright.’ He winked, smiling a knowing smile, as between two adventurous but trusting business partners. ‘We could have a highly successful future, you and I, if this works out the way I believe it shall. And of course, you have our legal document to protect your interests. As I say, Mrs. Allingham, you cannot fail!’ He noted with glee that her irises had not contracted. He still had her.

‘Well, Mr. Ying, if you return with the produce tomorrow, and I agree that it is of sufficient quality, then possibly I may consider your proposition. But no promises, mind.’

Wu Ying bowed, handing her the document and replacing his pen somewhere in the unsavoury recesses of his clothing. His next destination was just around the corner.

29

Pete was outside Ah Chee's shop, loading the cart. Wu Ying waited until Pete went inside for his next load.

Wu Ying had just started to enter the shop when a young, dark-haired European woman came out, carrying a basket. She was looking over her shoulder, saying something to Pete inside. Stepping onto the footpath, she collided with Wu Ying, spilling some of the contents of her basket.

'Oh!' she cried.

'I'm terribly sorry, Madam. Allow me.' Wu Ying swiftly bent over and picked up what had been spilt. He replaced the articles while she stood there, holding the basket. 'There appear to be no breakages.' In a surprising show of politeness, he offered his hand.

She smiled and took it. 'Thank you.'

Wu Ying looked after her as she made her way down the street, his smile lingering. He turned into the shop, where he greeted Pete. 'Pete, my friend, how are you? Is Mr. Ah Chee in?'

Pete, who evidently had missed the little drama outside, grinned at Wu Ying. 'Good, me old cobber.' He tilted his head towards the counter, where a nuggety old Chinaman was standing. Wu Ying was pleased to see that apart from Pete they were alone.

Wu Ying bowed to him. 'Mr. Ah Chee, I am very pleased to meet you. Master Pete has been very helpful, very kind to me.' Having established the best *guanxi* possible in the circumstances, he resumed in Cantonese, a mirror image of his conversation with Hilary.

'Can you spare a moment? My name is Wu Ying, and I have very good contacts with many European miners. I have a proposition for you.'

Ah Chee nodded that he might continue.

'I understand that your business is mostly with the Chinese but that, well, perhaps there could be room for expansion amongst the Europeans.'

'Europeans do business with Allingham's. That is our arrangement.'

Wu Ying cleared this throat. 'Ah, that arrangement may need some revising. I fear Allingham's may be experiencing some troubles. Mr. Allingham, you know, seems to be neglecting his business; he spends rather a lot of his time at the All Nations tavern. Possibly even elsewhere.' He smiled a meaningful smile.

Ah Chee half closed his eyes, the corners of his mouth twitched. 'I have heard such things.'

'Well, I have the contacts, and,' he switched to English, 'it would be too large an area for one person to deliver the goods. Unaided, Pete would be unable to service such an area. I, however, can help you. If you agree, he and I could cover the immediate area, and my colleague Ah Fung could do the rest, perhaps even as far as Scottsdale.'

'Scottsdale?' Ah Chee looked surprised. 'A two-day journey by horse and cart?'

'Ah well, Branxholm, then.' Wu Ying cursed his proneness to exaggerate.

'Hmmm. And you think Allingham's customers will buy from me?'

'When they see the quality of the produce, I'm sure they will.'

'I see there is money to be made in what you say, if the produce is genuine top quality ...' Ah Chee had switched to Cantonese. Wu Ying was undecided if that was because he was more comfortable in that language or to make sure Pete was unaware of what they were saying.

'You will be supplying the very best and freshest fruit and vegetables in the North-East. I can guarantee that. Furthermore,' Wu Ying produced another document, identical to that he'd left with Hilary, 'here is a contract we would both sign, that is, when you are satisfied with the quality of the produce and we agree on its price. I sell to you,' Wu Ying moved to the end of the counter and motioned Ah Chee to join him, 'and I guarantee, yes Mr. Ah Chee, I *guarantee*, I shall sell it on your behalf for something like one hundred per cent profit to you. Anything above that, I keep for myself. If I have over-estimated the value of the produce, then that would be my loss, not yours. But do not fear,' he added with a conspiratorial leer, 'I think we shall both do very well out of this. With my contacts, I shall be able to

extract a higher price from Allingham's European customers than you ever could, while you are guaranteed one hundred per cent profit for doing very little.'

As he was speaking, they stood side by side, Wu Ying pointing to where the prices would be inserted. Ah Chee seemed impressed, so impressed Wu Ying couldn't suppress an old habit. 'But there is one detail. I shall need a small advance, say ten pounds on credit?'

Ah Chee stalled. 'I will see the produce first. You think I would buy a cow that is hidden behind a mountain?'

Wu Ying again kicked himself for over-reaching. But he was optimistic over the outcome, so smiling he held out his right hand to conclude the deal. This was unusual between two Chinese, but Ah Chee shrugged and they shook hands, while Wu Ying reached for the document between them with his left hand.

With his Thomas Plains business now concluded for that day—more successfully than he had even dreamed—Wu Ying wanted to return to Moorina as soon as possible to tie up the loose ends. His luck remained: Pete was delivering supplies to Winnaleah. He would pass by Henry and Bing's garden. And yes indeed, he was happy to have company on the journey.

30

If Henry was upset to find his irrigation system had failed, he became very upset indeed when a careful inspection revealed that the damage had been deliberate. He had saved his vegetables and the gates were easily repaired, but the thought of someone going to the trouble of deliberately damaging their property here in Moorina, after the terrors of Lambing Flat, Henry found horrifying.

The following day, he and Bing went to Pioneer, where they did business mostly with Europeans. Houses clustered either side of the main street, and Bing knew it well enough to walk the length on his own. Housewives appeared on their doorsteps and called to him, helped themselves from his baskets, always paying the right amount, sometimes with a ha'penny or farthing extra for the nice, blind man. Henry worked the other end of town, looking back now and again to make sure his friend was managing. He always was.

But this day was different. While Henry was busy, a couple of boys took hold of Bing's baskets, one at each end of the long pole along his shoulder, and together they eased him round in a different direction. Disoriented, he walked into a wall and fell over, dropping his load, vegetables and fruit spilling onto the ground.

A woman, who'd seen it happen, yelled: 'You little scallywags. Look wotcha done to the poor blind man. Help him pick up his veggies, ya brats.'

The boys, grinning, picked up the fruit and vegetables and threw them roughly into the baskets. One looked up cheekily.

'Sorry, Mister Chink, but that was an accident, honest to gawd!'

Nobody believed him. Not Bing, not Henry, who'd heard the commotion and hurried back, and not the people in the street, for they kindly bought the rest of the stock, even the fruit that had been bruised.

When Wu Ying visited the two friends the following evening, they told him of the sabotaged sluice gates and Bing's humiliating treatment at the hands of the boys. He

listened in complete silence, looking into Henry's eyes with sympathy, running his long moustache through his fingers thoughtfully.

'Someone is trying to damage your business, I fear. I regret I was in Thomas Plains when all this happened. I arrived back only this afternoon.' He looked up at Henry, his eyes shining with innocence. 'I learned there that a European called Allingham wants to use his own fruit and vegetable suppliers and take over distribution. His intention is to drive Chinese market gardeners, such as yourselves, out of business.'

He paused. Looking into the distance, the picture of Oriental sagacity, he murmured: '*tu qiong bi xian*'.

'We do not understand Mandarin,' Henry said, somewhat irritably.

'When you unroll the map you will see that it hides a dagger. Friends, your business is threatened, as perhaps you already know. That is the dagger. But fear not, I can help you in your struggle. I know the map, you see.'

This was an interpretation of the proverb unique to Wu Ying, but his interpretations of traditional Chinese proverbs were usually more than somewhat idiosyncratic.

'Have you heard of Mr. Ah Chee, also of Thomas Plains?' Wu Ying asked. 'I am sure you must have. Well, Mr. Ah Chee wants to extend his business as far as Mt. Cameron. He has the transport and you have the best fruit and vegetables in the North-East! I see a prosperous future for you and for Mr. Ah Chee. But I see no future at all for Mr. Allingham. That is, if you take my advice.'

'But the most urgent matter is to protect your irrigation channels from the enemy who did this evil thing. I think I know who it was. I also know how to prevent it reoccurring, but it will cost some money. I will need to buy my way into the enemy's favour. £10 should be sufficient. It will also cost you a bowl of *mai jau*, which I shall be delighted to consume with you.'

'All will be well. Have no fear, my friends.'

Next morning saw Ah Fung and Wu Ying load Ah Fung's cart at Henry and Bing's garden, thereby nearly exhausting their available stock. Wu Ying kept a careful tally

of all the vegetables and fruit he loaded, estimating their market value. With the help of his faithful abacus he then calculated the total value, assuming all goods were sold. This figure could only be approximate, because there was the inevitable bargaining, but even Wu Ying was astonished and delighted at the result: the whole cartload should be worth *well* over £35, give or take. Multiply that by three—he planned to sell them three times over, at a discount to Hilary and Ah Chee, and to the customers at full cent per cent—deduct the inevitable payoffs, and Wu Ying concluded he stood to gain by well over £60. More even, if his bargaining skills did not desert him in the morning.

And that was not including the Fourth String that he intended to pluck prior to his meeting with Hilary. If that string remained silent, then he would have to sing a merry little song to Hilary. A very merry little song.

31

Hilary had not known what to make of her encounter with Wu Ying. At first she was convinced that the evil looking Celestial with the straggly grey hair was trying to swindle her out of £20 and was ready to send him packing. But when he had produced the legal document she was impressed. Surely, she thought, that would protect her against any funny business? Convinced of that, she went to sleep deciding that it all depended on the figures they arrived at in the morning.

But when next morning she saw a large cart full of fruit and vegetables that she couldn't fault for quality, she was even more impressed. A quick estimate told her it would fetch in excess of £35 at market price. But there was a catch. If she offered £10 for the load, one hundred per cent would yield her only £10 profit, leaving Wu Ying with a profit of £15 or thereabouts. The more money she put up front, the more profit she made and the less he did, and therefore the less likely he would be to agree to her price. Eventually, after some unseemly bargaining, she parted with £16. For his part, he put down £5 as his consideration to make it all legal, and in so doing, any remaining doubts she had were dispelled. She would be making 100 per cent for doing nothing except signing a document, inexplicably leaving him with a deficit of £2! But, she shrugged, that was his affair—and hadn't he hinted darkly that he would himself sell for rather more than the market value of £35? She chuckled, satisfied now that all would do very well out of this unusual deal.

She welcomed the idea of doing business with this Wu Ying in future.

Ah Chee, for his part, glanced at the produce and put up £17 without further question. If he had wondered what Wu Ying was going to make on the deal he said nothing further. Like many astute businessmen, he would have learned not ask too many questions about an attractive deal. The other's business was none of his.

Wu Ying had already plucked the Fourth String. He had paid Fred Allingham a visit and found him, as he had expected, in the bar of the All Nations. Wu Ying estimated the price of his silence concerning Fred's second business would be worth £50.

He was wrong. Fred was so amenable, Wu Ying immediately regretted he hadn't asked for £100. Allingham's other business, he thought ruefully, must be making a fortune! Wu Ying knew that this strike could only be that of the cunning snake, a singleton. After the disharmony created by the transactions in vegetables, The Fly would have to wing his way to find another cracked egg. Very swiftly. Still, a sum likely to be well in excess of £120 for one week's work was something to be proud of.

And, he thought, other poor fools broke their backs tin mining.

DISMANTLE THE BRIDGE AFTER CROSSING IT

32

Wu Ying had struck in Thomas Plains! The news clanged loudly and unpleasantly in Jack's head. Knowing full well how dangerous the Hakka was, Jack was horrified that Miss Teresa had insisted on coming, but how could he have told his new teacher what to do and what not to do? How could he have said: 'No Miss Teresa, you are not coming and there's an end to it!?' He also knew full well that if he did meet that evil demon again, he would be violent—but he must not allow himself to display any such lack of control in front of his teacher!

Given these dark thoughts, Jack was surprised to find himself enjoying the journey to Moorina on Pete's cart—especially in the company of Miss Teresa. If only they were not on such a mad errand! Pete and Lizzie sat on the front bench, the others in the dray, their backs against the sides.

It was a sunny day, and the road wound through some beautiful country. Soon after leaving Thomas Plains, Jack looked back the way they had come, to the hills of the Blue Tier. He was shocked by the devastation. The hills around Lottah were nearly empty of covering vegetation, roads and tracks twisted and snaked like scars on a criminal's whipped back. And there, the size of a ha'penny from this distance, the waterwheel of the Anchor mine was just discernable.

'Miss Teresa,' Jack touched Terry's arm and pointed to the mountains. He attempted some English with her. 'See mountain. Bad, bad.'

'*Hayaa, haiyaa,*' Terry replied with a laugh, '*ho m'duk.* Jack, your English is so much better than my Chinese!'

Jack blushed with pleasure.

Pete swung round from the driving seat, handing Lizzie the reins. 'Well, I reckon that the mining up there's a bit of all right. Just think of all that lovely lolly that's come outa the ground there.' He held out his hand, rubbing thumb and forefinger together. 'And when the Liberator Mine gets really going, like they say it will, there'll be plenty more. The Chinamen that work up there spend their money with old Ah Chee, and old Ah Chee gives me a job. Shit, trees'll grow again. Look around ya. Plenty of trees, mate.'

Indeed there were. Dense forests with massive trees, the undergrowth thicker and richer than that found alongside the road to Emu Flat, stood in rich profusion on either side of the road. Not that Jack had understood much of what Pete had said. Looking around him, Jack felt in awe of the bush but not frightened; not frightened like he was when he first arrived in this strange new country. He wanted to know the names of the trees. He asked Charlie to ask Pete.

‘Well, see that big bugger? The bark running way up the trunk? That’s a stringybark. String-y-bark. Got it?’

No, Jack didn’t get it. He just smiled at Pete and shook his head. Pete turned back to Lizzie. They fought over who’d take the reins, giggling and nudging each other as they played.

Jack, Charlie and Terry chatted in a jumble of English and Chinese, with Charlie as translator-in-chief. This way, Jack managed to convey that ‘Wu Ying’ was not a proper Chinese name: it meant ‘Fly’.

‘Oh, I see,’ Terry said, ‘like in the penny dreadfuls! The criminals in those stories have names like that, but they would say “*The Fly*”, not just “Fly”. I wonder why a man would be named after such an unpleasant creature?’

‘Because he is an unpleasant creature. The most unpleasant and the most dangerous Jack knows,’ Charlie explained. ‘He beg you, Miss Teresa, be very careful if we see him. You must not go near him!’

As Charlie translated, Jack stared at Miss Teresa pleadingly. He had been enjoying himself but was then brought to earth with a thud when he perceived the danger she might be in.

‘Poo, he’s only a petty thief. *I’m* not scared,’ she dismissed his plea.

He admired her for her courage, but again warned. ‘No, he Hairy Thief ... Charlie, you explain.’

But the differences between petty thieves and hairy thieves, as conceived in the complexities of Chinese politics, were too much to convey in the time remaining. At Krushka’s Bridge, they turned right, northwards, and followed the river. Within minutes they were at Henry and Bing’s market garden, prettily situated beside the river.

Jack and Charlie questioned the two gardeners, only to discover that Wu Ying had befriended them, offering to sell their vegetables. They had thought he was doing them a great favour. When he hadn't returned to pay them, as he had promised, they were worried lest something had befallen him. But when Pete turned up enquiring after Wu Ying's whereabouts, explaining that their vegetables had already been sold twice over in Thomas Plains, they realised that they too had been cheated.

'Do you have any idea where he lives?' Jack asked anxiously in Cantonese.

'No idea,' Henry replied. 'I saw him approach from Frome Road. It is possible that he lives along there somewhere.'

Henry showed them around their garden, now almost empty of produce, and pointed out the damaged sluice gates. He explained: 'Wu Ying must have done that damage. He pretended somebody else had done so. It was an enemy, he said, and he would track him down. He said he would stop it happening again. He also asked for money to pay for doing that. Pah, he was the enemy, nobody else.'

'He also paid some boys to make me walk the wrong way.' Bing said. 'They swung my baskets and I lost all sense of direction. I stumbled into a wall and fell over. I suffered no physical injury, but I felt so humiliated!'

'We were in Pioneer again yesterday,' Henry added. 'A woman who had helped Bing told us she asked the boys why they did such a terrible thing. They said an older Chinaman with a long moustache had given them a penny each to do it. He told them the blind man liked people to test his sense of direction.'

Jack exploded with anger on hearing this. 'What he owes you will be repaid to you in full,' he promised, 'and we will see that he is severely punished.'

Agreeing that Frome Road seemed a good place to commence the search, they set off. A mile or so along Frome Road past the Moorina turn-off, Garibaldi Road branched off to the north, taking one to the mines at Garibaldi; to continue east would bring one back to Emu Flat. They proceeded towards Emu Flat at little more than walking pace. Jack was so anxious he jumped out of the cart and walked briskly ahead, determined he would spot Wu Ying first. He wished to protect his beloved teacher from whatever evils the foul creature might wreak!

They passed several Chinese miners on foot. A couple of miles out of town, Jack noticed one fellow standing by the roadside, peering up to the hills, a hand shading his eyes. He looked familiar. Pete also saw him and started. 'Hey!' he called.

It was Ah Fung. He turned and recognised Pete immediately, but instead of fleeing as might have been expected, he approached the cart.

'Ah Pete,' he said, his mouth continuing to open and to close.

'Do you recognise *me*?' Jack asked in Cantonese.

'On boat,' he replied in poor Cantonese.

'Where is Wu Ying?'

He shrugged, waving toward the hills. 'There, maybe.'

Charlie asked Ah Fung if he spoke Mandarin. As it turned out that he did, Charlie took over. He discovered that Ah Fung, too, was looking for Wu Ying. After selling his cartload of vegetables, Ah Fung had met Wu Ying last Thursday at a pre-arranged rendezvous at the Frome Road turn-off. He handed Wu Ying his takings, £37/11/2d. Ah Fung had expected to be paid well for his trouble. He was given one single pound note.

He was disappointed, knowing how much Wu Ying had made in his triple dealing, but Wu Ying had laughed at his protests—and left him standing there. It gradually dawned on Ah Fung, as he trundled back to Moorina, that he might be seen as an accomplice in the crime. Many witnesses could have identified him as the one who had sold them stolen vegetables. 'But,' he told them, 'aren't I a victim too? I had received but one miserable pound for my pains!' He concluded that he had to find where Wu Ying was hiding and tell the authorities so that Wu Ying, and not he himself, would be charged with the theft.

Terry interrupted Charlie's translation of Ah Fung's tale of woe. 'Tell him that that doesn't matter a jot! The dunderhead was still an accomplice and he gained from the crime, even if it was only one pound. He's a goner whether or not they catch Wu Ying!'

When this message was conveyed, from English via Cantonese for Jack's benefit to Mandarin, Ah Fung rolled his eyes in anguish. He resumed his story.

Ah Fung, clutching his pound note, had had sense enough to pretend to Wu Ying that he was returning to his hut in Moorina. In fact, he had halted the cart around a bend and then run back under the cover of the bushes at the side of the road. He was just in time to spy Wu Ying turn up a narrow track heading towards the hill.

‘That way,’ he pointed. ‘I follow, but he go. Vanish. No more see.’

Ah Fung climbed aboard the cart. He told them about the first time he had met Wu Ying on the boat. ‘You there too,’ he said, pointing to Jack and Charlie. Wu Ying persuaded him to become his ‘friend and foot soldier’, as Wu Ying had put it, and they agreed to work together. Although he was Wu Ying’s own accomplice, Ah Fung had gradually realised that Wu Ying had been cheating him consistently.

Jack interrupted. ‘Pah, Wu Ying seems to take particular delight in cheating his own so-called friends! You tell the ladies that, Charlie; you tell them how dangerous this man is. Miss Teresa and Miss Elizabeth must not go near him!’

Charlie obliged but the girls did not entirely welcome Jack’s concern.

‘Tell Jack we’re both big girls. We can look after ourselves. Anyway,’ Terry added with a coy sidelong glance at Jack, ‘don’t we have three big strong husky men to protect us from one silly old codger?’

Jack received this in silence, his brown eyes pleading with Terry. She relented, touching his arm, her own blue-green eyes smiling sunny assurance.

‘Thanks, Jack.’ For an instant, it looked like she might kiss him, but she did not.

It was agreed that Wu Ying was almost certainly hiding somewhere on that hill, and as it would be dark in about three hours, they knew there was little time in which to find him. Ah Fung told them to stop a few hundred yards after the Garibaldi turn-off.

‘There,’ he pointed to a small track that disappeared into thick bush on the side the hill. ‘He go there.’

They all clambered off the cart; Jack leapt out first and turned to help Terry down. He started to say something, but smiling, she wagged a warning forefinger at him to cease his nagging. He shrugged and turned away.

The track was narrow and steep, forcing them to walk in single file. Pete, knowing the area better than the others, led, followed by Ah Fung and the two ladies. Charlie and Jack brought up the rear.

Pete walked rapidly, so eager was he to find the miscreant, that he quickly outstripped the rest of them. The others proceeded as fast as they could but Ah Fung was a nuisance, slow and clumsy, impeding their progress. They lost sight of Pete. Unable to call after him, lest they warn Wu Ying of their presence, Jack pushed Ah Fung aside and with all possible haste, they attempted to catch up with Pete.

He was nowhere to be found. Pete, like Wu Ying himself, had vanished into the dense bush. Dusk was beginning to fall. Charlie voiced the fear that they would become lost themselves in this wilderness that had now turned so threatening.

‘I think we should give up and return first thing in the morning.’

‘It seems the most sensible thing,’ Terry agreed.

‘But we can’t just *leave* him,’ Lizzie wailed. ‘You go back. I’ll stay here in case he turns up.’

‘Don’t be silly, Lizzie, you have no provisions and it’s bloody cold already. You’ll die of exposure—or one of them Tasmanian tigers might ... *getcha!*’ Terry lifted her hands as if they were claws, pulling a fierce face and pretending to bite Lizzie. Jack stared at Terry with amazed respect: that a *teacher* could be so sensible yet so humorous!

Ah Fung, teeth chattering with cold or with fright, it was hard to tell, pleaded: ‘Take me with you. I have no place go now.’

They returned to Pete’s cart, the horse waiting patiently, and climbed aboard. Lizzie, sobbing quietly, handed the reins to Charlie. He rattled them on the horse’s back and the cart moved forward—then lurched sideways. ‘WHOA!’ Charlie called and leapt out. In the dim light he saw one wheel was skewed dangerously. Another step and it would have fallen off, and they would have been stranded.

‘All out, left side, *quickly!*’ he ordered. ‘Keep the weight off that wheel.’ He told the others to support the weight of the cart while he wrestled the wheel back onto the axle.

‘Huh, someone has removed the cotter pin holding the wheel on the axle. Bloody Wu Ying, I bet! We’ll have to obtain a new pin. Ah Fung, where is your cart?’

‘Moorina Road. You want use my cart, I stay with you in Emu Flat, ah?’

33

Sunday the Twenty-ninth of September, 1889

Lizzie and I insisted we call the police; Jack and Charlie insisted we did not. Jack wanted to settle this himself. He seemed to be waging his own private war against Wu Ying; why, I knew not. Ah Fung likewise had no wish to call the police. That I did understand—he had no wish to find himself dressed in a canary suit. But Jack and his private war were as nothing compared to Pete’s safety, particularly now that it seemed impossible that he was not Wu Ying’s prisoner. Unless . . . unless . . . it suddenly hit me: Pete *was* Wu Ying’s accomplice after all and had joined up with his fellow in crime! That settled it, call the police we would. Lizzie needed no persuading on that score, but I kept *my* reasons for insisting that we do that to myself.

We thought the district police station would probably be in Scottsdale. Allingham’s Store housed the local post office and had a Morse code telegraph. However, it was quite late when we finally returned to Thomas Plains and the store had closed for the night. I was undismayed. I thought our business more important than Hilary’s sleep so I pounded on the door with both fists. She unlocked, grumbling.

‘What’s all this hullabaloo, disturbing me in the middle of the night? Can’t it wait until morning?’ The old sourpuss scowled at us, as we stood shivering on her doorstep.

‘We need to call the police . . .’

‘Pete Jackson’s missing!’ Lizzie interrupted.

The old termagant’s scowl deepened. As if she cared about Pete’s whereabouts.

‘It’s about the thieving bastard who swiped your veggies,’ I said firmly.

‘Ah,’ said she, ‘now that is different. Half a mo. We’ll have to call the Ellesmere station.’

She opened the shop and let Lizzie and I in, the others remaining outside. The post office, with its Morse code machine, brass lever, black knob and all, was at

the end of the counter. As Hilary sat in front of the machine, I asked: 'Where's Ellesmere? I've never heard of it.'

'You've 'eard of Scottsdale, I suppose? Well, then.' She scowled up at me then, placing her hand on the knob, she fluttered off dots and dashes in a fast rattle.

'Wait a tick. We'll soon get a reply,' she said. Sure enough, after a minute or so it started rattling back. She picked up a pad and wrote things down. It was fascinating!

'They promise one of the traps will be here tomorrow, mid morning at the latest. And they say you'd all better be right here yourselves to make a statement.'

What a relief that Ah Fung's cart was outside to take us back to Emu Flat! It had become freezing cold, and we huddled together to keep warm—except Ah Fung of course who sat up the front doing all the work. I aimed my huddle as close to Jack as I dared. Without saying anything, he picked up some bags in the back of the cart and laid them over us, mostly over me. I tried to catch his eye for some signal that I could rattle back to him in my own Morse code. And this would have been my message: *I could love you, Jack Yang, really I could! Chinese, Calathumpian, who cares? I want a man like you, so caring, yet so strong.*

He appeared not to share my thoughts but stared out into the night, as if he was counting the trees that passed slowly in the gloom along Emu Flat Road.

But when we reached our house, I saw in the moonlight that Jack was smiling *so* sweetly as he lifted the bags off me.

'We safe arrive, Miss Teresa. Good night. We say, *joutau*.'

He helped me descend from the cart. '*Tingyat geen*.'

'What's that mean? Tomorrow something?'

'*Haiyaa*. "See you tomorrow." You very clever, Miss Teresa. We come your house. *Tingyat, ho jou la!*'

'Yes,' Charlie confirmed, 'early tomorrow morning. Good night.'

34

Monday the Thirtieth of September, 1889

Early indeed it was when they came to our house. The butcherbirds were in full song, the magpies calling to their loved ones—but last night’s magic had gone. Oh dear, Hermione, was it ever there?

All of us—except Ah Fung—wanted to join the search party, but my reckoning was that the copper would be more successful than poor Jack in preventing us girls from tagging along. So if we met the policeman at Hilary’s, as asked, we’d be told to stay put. We decided instead that Charlie alone would wait at Hilary’s store and meet the officer to apprise him of what had happened and to lead him to where Pete went missing, while the rest of us took Ah Fung’s cart back to recommence the search ourselves. We would also take a cotter pin to mend Old WS’s cart. Ah Fung decided he would remain in hiding under Jack’s bed, where, apparently, he had despatched himself immediately on arrival last night.

I tried to use a spot of mental philosophy on Jack. As we prepared to leave Hilary’s, I asked Charlie to translate as follows: ‘We’ll stay close to you, Jack. We shall be safe then, because *you* shall protect us!’ It might have lost something in Charlie’s translation, but the look on Jack’s face!

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘I protect!’

That settled, we calculated that by the time the policeman had ridden to Thomas Plains, heard Charlie out, ridden back to Moorina with Charlie directing him, we’d already be well into our own search. And with a bit of luck, we’d find Pete before the copper did.

We didn’t. We met said copper hours later on the track, near the spot where we had abandoned the search last night. The officer of the law was somewhat *vexed* to find we had proceeded in advance to conduct our own search. He was a large man with a heavy ginger moustache and a cast in his brilliant blue eyes that made him look demented.

‘You have no right to be here!’ he bellowed at us as soon as he had espied us.

Thanks for letting Wu Ying know we're hot on his trail, thought I.

'But Pete's me boyfriend,' Lizzie whimpered.

'*But Pete's me boyfriend,*' he mimicked in a sissy falsetto before shouting:

'That's all the more reason not to interfere! Now get out of my way. This is a job for a black tracker, not a couple of weepy bits of muslin. I'll have a tracker sent out from Launceston if we don't find your precious boyfriend today. And you two,' he rounded on Jack and Charlie, 'stay with me. Tell me where you finished your search and we'll proceed in a northerly direction from there. Now, keep your eyes peeled. And keep *quiet!* We don't want to let the yellow bastard know we're here. If he's got anything to do with this, which I doubt. I reckon Jackson just toppled off the edge of the cliff. Easy enough to do. Now you two bints,' he swung around to us again, his crazy eyes scorching our faces, 'hop it, like I said.'

Poor Lizzie was upset enough as it was, but to be pissed on by this clown was too much.

'Coo,' she said, her contempt giving her splendid dignity, '*some* people could do with a lesson in manners.' She tossed her head. 'Come on, Terry.'

'Take Ah Fung's cart back,' Charlie said as we turned to go. 'We use Ah Chee's.'

And with that the three *men* began to search in a northerly direction—whereas Pete had disappeared south from here. If Pete was not lost but had been waylaid by Wu Ying—or if Pete had met up with his accomplice, perish the thought—it would most likely be back from whence we came. It would not be within cooe of where Constable Rogers insisted they search. But, no point in saying so—I had had *sufficient* of the length of Constable Rogers' vicious tongue. And as for the length of anything else of his, I could not imagine anything less desirable.

As we returned along the narrow path, I looked over the edge down at the creek fifty feet or so below. I didn't tell Lizzie what I was thinking—that if Pete *had* fallen off the edge, he wouldn't be a pleasant sight. It was a sheer drop onto rocks. But I didn't think Pete had fallen over, not accidentally anyway. Pete was used to the bush. Wu Ying was behind his disappearance, one way or another, there was no doubt in my mind about *that*; the swiped cotter pin was evidence enough.

We took our time, inspecting every tree on the way. At one point, where the gully was at its narrowest, I noticed a peculiar formation. A fallen tree trunk spanned the gap, but its other end on the opposite side of the gully was caught in the fork of another tree. I'm not a bushie, but it still seemed unusual to this city girl.

'Lizzie,' I whispered, 'what do you think of that?'

She studied it, before grabbing my arm. 'Hide,' she whispered.

We crouched behind a tree, staring hard at the vista opposite.

'See,' said she, her voice low, 'if you put that trunk on the ground, it would act as a bridge, wouldn't it? Wonder what's behind that bush?'

We peered through the branches at a thick bush the other side. 'Could be a cave behind there,' she whispered.

'Could be,' I agreed.

'And look at that tree. If that log is a bridge, then there'd 'ave to be another tree this side like that one, wouldn't there?' She pointed to a tree beside us. It had a fork at head height, just like the one opposite. There could be no doubt, surely.

'See, when he's not at home it'd be hoisted this end. So, when it's up *that* end, like it is now, the devil must be home. And if he is, then he might have Pete with him. And he probably knows we're here searching for him, thanks to the bellowing of that stupid, great ox, so...'

'So?'

'He's trapped isn't he?'

'And as soon as we go, he's untrapped, isn't he?'

'He is.'

'So we better stay then, hadn't we?'

We settled down to wait until the others returned this way. Some time later, how long I had no idea, I thought I heard something. I listened harder and heard a muffled grunting noise. An animal?

'Hear that?' I breathed to Lizzie

She nodded.

'What is it?'

Her face looked hurt. 'Sounds like someone gagged.'

‘*Pete!*’ It appeared that I was wrong about said lad, after all.

‘Oh gawd,’ her voice caught, ‘we gotta be careful. The question is, is Pete alone? If he is, we can rescue him. If he’s not, and we try to rescue him, Wu Ying will do damage. Certainly to Pete, probably to us.’

‘Job for the copper, isn’t it?’

‘That clown would bugger it. No,’ she grabbed my hand and thrust her face into mine. ‘*We* gotta do something ...’

Constable Rogers must have been reading Lizzie’s thoughts with that new-fangled telepathy I’d heard about, because at that instant we heard in the distance the dulcet tones of that clown in the very same process of buggering it. Constable Rogers was roaring orders.

‘What a total nincompoop that man is ...’ I started to whisper. But stopped—it was evident that someone else had heard one of Tassie’s finest in full cry.

Wu Ying.

As we watched, the bush at the other side of the gully shook and parted. A wicked looking face peered out. And yes, it *was* the man who’d bumped into me at Ah Chee’s store. He slowly stood up, dressed in flowing rags, a military rifle slung over his shoulder. He stared intently up the valley where we had heard Rogers. We crouched lower, peering through the bushes. He unslung the rifle and played with the lever, motioning as if he was loading a cartridge into the breech. He clapped it to his shoulder and aimed in the direction of Rogers’ voice.

‘*Piew!*’

He cackled like a tickled hen. He then pretended to reload and went through this charade a few times.

‘*Piew*, ha ha ha! *Piew!*’ No mistaking what he was planning to do.

He slung the rifle back on his shoulder, lifted the bridge off its fork in the tree and lowered it to the ground.

‘Fuck, Terry, he’s going to cross over to us.’

‘He’s off to shoot the others in cold blood! Keep hidden.’ I glanced wildly around and spied two stout sticks on the ground. I picked up both and passed one to

Lizzie. 'When he's over this side, and turns his back on us to lift the bridge back, go for his head,' I mouthed.

As if he suspected he could be ambushed, the creature drew a small, shiny revolver from his belt. With that at the ready in one hand, he slithered over the bridge as smoothly as a rock python. He lifted the bridge up with one hand, his back to us.

We sprang from our hiding place. I aimed my stick at his revolver hand, Lizzie delivered a mighty thwack to his head. I don't quite know what happened next. Lizzie's stick I think struck his rifle, for there was a tremendous explosion right beside my ear. Lizzie screamed, he shrieked. He leapt a yard in the air and seemed to stay there for seconds, snarling and spitting like a Tasmanian devil, his legs flailing. When his feet hit the ground, he was down the track and out of sight like a squall. I was stunned, horrified by the evil suddenness of it.

Then I saw Lizzie, lying on the ground, blood flowing from her head.

'Lizzie!' I screamed.

35

Jack watched Miss Teresa and Miss Lizzie disappear down the track at first with relief, but then with increasing apprehension the more he thought about it.

‘Charlie,’ he said quietly, ‘aren’t the ladies going past the place where Pete disappeared? Wouldn’t they be safer if they had stayed with us?’

Charlie’s eyes clouded, as he nodded. ‘Yes, I agree now you mention it. I think we ...’

‘Speak fucking English, you two! I’ll not have you talking behind my back. Christ alone knows what you’re plotting!’ Constable Rogers stopped walking, and turned to stand in front of them, challenging not only their speech but their movement.

‘My friend here cannot speak good English, Sir,’ Charlie explained. ‘He is saying it is more dangerous for the ladies to go. More better they stay with us maybe. Pete was lost the way they go, not here ...’

‘Are you questioning my judgement?’ Rogers asked in tones of outraged incredulity, eyes blazing, moustache bristling.

Charlie and Jack stared at each other. Jack had not understood the constable’s words, but his tone told him well enough that his suggestion had not been well received. ‘Tell him, Charlie, that Pete was lost further down the track, not here. Tell him we have searched here.’

‘I just told him that, Jack. The fool is angry that we are questioning his decisions,’ Charlie replied, at the same time smiling agreeably at Rogers and nodding. ‘No, Sir,’ he then said in English, ‘of course we do not question you. We only tell you what we know so you decide more better.’

Charlie clasped his hands in front of him and bowed. Jack caught his cue and also bowed. This was the way to deal with this idiot, he thought. Humour him, and then do what we think best.

‘Ah, that’s better,’ Rogers allowed them a thin smile. ‘We do it my way, alright? Goodo then. You say you finished searching near this spot. Very well, let’s spread out and search further up the track. You, what’s-your-name,’ he said pointing

to Charlie, 'concentrate on the left side. You,' he barked, pointing to Jack, 'on the gully side. I'll go on ahead. Go on, pass on my orders to your Chinese cobbler. Chop, chop.'

Jack and Charlie did most of their searching looking over their shoulders to where both believed Wu Ying and Pete might really be found, but were unable to find any clues. The further they went in the opposite direction the more certain Jack was that they would not find anything significant.

After about half an hour of this, Jack stopped. 'Tell him, Charlie, as persuasively as you can, that Pete could not *possibly* have gone this far in the time when he left us. I'm worried about the ladies.'

'I'll do my best,' Charlie grunted. He translated what Jack had said, leaving out the bit about the ladies.

'Good point,' Rogers said to Charlie's astonishment. 'Yes, I had just decided that myself. We'll carry out our recce in the obverse direction. SQUAD!' he suddenly bawled, 'Abouuuut TURN! Quiiiiick MARCH!'

Pushing between them, Rogers marched briskly back down the track, leading the way, arms aswing. He shouted over his shoulder: 'Now, remind me when we reach our starting point. From there we shall proceed with caution. We are *certain* now, are we not, that our quarry lies thither. Good work, men.'

Charlie didn't bother to translate. They proceeded in this manner for another fifteen minutes, when there was a sudden loud report, like a gunshot, followed by a man's shout, a woman's scream, then a second scream, like someone's name.

'Both of them!' Jack yelled in Cantonese, pointing towards the gully a mile or more distant as the crow flies. 'There! Miss Teresa, Miss Lizzie, both, *aiyaaa!*'

'Fuck those stupid women! Didn't I just *tell* them ...'

'Out of our way,' Charlie exploded, pushing past Constable Rogers and running down the track towards the sound, Jack close on his heels.

Whatever had happened, Jack was terribly afraid they would be too late by the time they got there. They had been wasting too much time searching in the wrong place. He ran as fast as he could, passing Charlie and was well down the track when suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks.

He jumped around to face the others pelting after him. He spread his arms wide, his face frantic. He rammed a forefinger against his lips, screwing his face up into a grimace that said in any language:

‘Stop right where you are! And for God’s sake, don’t make a noise!’

They quickly saw why.

36

Later the same day

Lizzie was still breathing. Thank Christ for that. I was inspecting her wound closely to see how bad it was when her eyes fluttered open. Those big honey eyes stared at me in astonishment.

‘Bugger shot me! I’m not dead am I?’

‘No no, Lizzie dear, you’re alive, thank *heavens*.’ I melted with relief and kissed her.

The bullet had grazed the side of her head. Blood was seeping through her hair. I dabbed gingerly with my hankie. She winced, but I was fairly certain it was only a surface graze.

‘Fuck, it ’urts,’ she mumbled, trying to sit up.

I gently pressed her down. ‘Lizzie, I’m pretty sure it’s only grazed you, but lie there a while, you must be in shock.’

She brushed me aside. ‘Let me go, Terry. We gotta get Pete.’ She stood and hollered: ‘PETE!’

We heard that grunting noise again. She made to walk across the gap along the log but I stopped her. ‘No, Lizzie, not with that head of yours. I’ll go.’

As I stepped on the bridge, I noticed something shining in the grass. Wu Ying’s revolver! Without thinking, I stooped and picked it up. I slipped it inside my garments—never you mind where, Hermione. As I stepped onto the log I realised what a terrifying, *crazy* thing I was about to do. I took one step, then another step, then another, my arms held out straight on either side for better balance. A slip of a tree trunk separated me from a hideous drop onto rocks. I could only think: *Christ Almighty, don’t look down Terry, don’t look down!*

I made it—obviously, or you wouldn’t be reading this, Hermione—but my relief on stepping off the log was immediately replaced by panic: *I have to return the way I came!* I stopped, bent over and straightened up, breathing deeply. I did this about three or four times, until my heart had stopped climbing up my throat, trying to choke me.

I pushed through the bush a few paces, and there I was, inside a bloody great cave, furnished like a house! On the floor was a man lying down, all trussed up and gagged.

It was Pete. And his legs were at a very odd angle. Merciful gods, they were broken! His eyes were like fish's eyes, cold with pain.

I bent over him. 'It's all right Pete, Lizzie's come here special for you.' I undid the gag.

'Terry ...' he croaked and flopped back into my arms.

He was still.

37

Still later Monday

There was no way out of it. I had to cross that bloody *terrifying* bridge again. I took a few more deep breaths, waved to Lizzie who was kneeling on the grass the other side, blood trickling from her head. As I mounted the log, she jammed her hands into her mouth, as if to prevent herself from screaming. Thank you, Lizzie, I thought, just the vote of confidence I needed.

I was about halfway when what remaining confidence I had deserted me. I wavered, nearly losing my balance, and lurched forward bending low, throwing my arms straight out on either side. For one split second, I saw those dreadful rocks grinning up at me, like bloody great broken teeth ready to crunch me to bits, but I steadied just at the very moment when I thought I was a goner. Where to look? Not down. Not at Lizzie, to add her terror to my own.

I looked up the track a little—and there was Jack! His arms were stretched out towards me, as if he were standing on this very bridge coming to meet me. In truth, his arms were a lifespan from me, yet the sight of them gave me courage. He was walking slowly, quietly, *purposefully*, until he was indeed on the other end of the log, only yards away. This was it. Two quick steps and I fell into those waiting arms outstretched to receive me. I clung to him and sobbing with relief, I kissed him passionately, bang on the lips.

‘Oh Jack ...’ Words were ready to gush forth, as they would from the heroine’s ruby red lips in the best romance. Yes, *romance*. My hero, you have saved me, and here I am in your arms! Oh bliss! Oh ecstasy!

But Jack was reading from another script. He had turned to stone, rigid, unyielding. He stepped back out of my embrace and mumbled, ‘Miss Teresa, I ... er ...’

I couldn’t have felt any worse had he slapped me. Had I had been so *forward*? Surely some licence must be granted to one just snatched from the very jaws of death itself! I felt myself flushing, curse it, so I said briskly, as if to walk as quickly as possible away from any hint of intimacy, ‘Thank you, Jack. I am well

now. But poor Lizzie has been wounded. Not seriously I think, but she needs medical attention. And there's another matter.'

By this stage Charlie and Constable Rogers had joined us. I related, coolly and *politely*, how we had found Wu Ying's cave just across the gully and how we tried to stop him escaping. Constable Rogers stepped in front of me, elbowing his ungracious way into my explanation, his moustache erect as porcupine quills.

'Do you mean to say you had the scoundrel trapped and you let him *escape*? Didn't I *order* you two to return to Thomas Plains? You bloody interfering bints, I'll have you charged with obstructing the law!' roared he, huge and purple. Wasn't our Constable Rogers such a *nice* man?

'Lizzie's HURT!' I shouted back. 'And so's Pete, you know—the missing party? Who *we* found, didn't we? He's badly injured and he's in the cave, in case you want to know. You weren't even warm where you were looking.'

'That's the fault of these two.' He jerked his head at Jack and Charlie, the latter carefully inspecting Lizzie's wound.

'We saved your lives as well as Pete's, for Christ's sake,' I shot back. 'He was going after you with a bloody great rifle, if you'd let me explain! If you charge us, when we did the job *you* were supposed to do, which was to find *Pete* if you remember, I hope you enjoy hearing us give our evidence in court!' Steady on, Terry, steady on, don't push him too far, I told myself. I can only say that I was more than a little *tetchy* after Jack's rescue, followed so closely by his strange rejection.

'If it wasn't for you, I'd have apprehended the criminal by now,' he trumpeted. Then something seeped through the brickwork of his thick skull. '*What* did you say? Coming after us?'

I thought it wise to change tack. Girls of our calling ought not to get on the wrong side of a copper. 'I'm sorry, Constable, my tongue sometimes has legs of its own. But see here,' I said patiently, 'he crossed the bridge with a gun in his ... er, with *that* gun slung on his back,' I quickly corrected myself, pointing to Wu Ying's rifle lying on the ground, 'while we lay hidden. When he'd turned his back to raise this end of the bridge, we rushed out and each of us struck him with a heavy stick. In the struggle, his rifle discharged and wounded Lizzie, in case you hadn't noticed.'

Then he disappeared down the track. I'm sorry I wasn't fast enough to catch him for you.' I placed my arms akimbo, half-closing my eyes, looking sideways at him.

But he wasn't listening; he wasn't even looking at me. He'd bent down to pick up the rifle. 'Hmmm, a Martini-Henry Mark II. Bonzer job, these. Dead accurate, if a bit on the heavy side. But no safety catch on these early jobs. That must have caused the ...'

'For Christ's sake, you great *blockhead*,' Lizzie shrieked, 'can't we fetch Pete out from over there and take him to the doctor?'

Rogers' eyes bulged murderously, the porcupine quills under his nose standing to attention. Lizzie was due for dire punishment.

I thought I'd do well to pour oil on these troubled waters. 'I'm sorry, Constable, but Lizzie is over-wrought. I understand your concern with the weapon, but Pete does need a doctor. Both his legs appear to be broken.'

Rogers couldn't argue with that. Without saying anything, he hauled himself upright and squinted at a nearby tree, sizing it up. He took a small hatchet from his belt and set to felling the tree. At least he got *that* right: it nicely spanned the chasm. He lifted our end of the tree and placed it beside the existing bridge to broaden it. Charlie and Jack fashioned a stretcher from a couple of saplings, threading the arms of their coats through the poles and buttoning the coats together.

The three men crossed the bridge to the cave. I followed—happy now there was a bridge I could use without staring death in its gruesome face. Jack, Charlie and I bent over Pete and gently inched him onto the stretcher. Fortunately, Pete was still senseless otherwise he would have *suffered*. With Jack at one end and Charlie at the other, they carefully bore him across the bridge. I returned to the cave to see about my precious brooch.

Our masterful Constable Rogers meanwhile was searching the cave. I watched him bend down, delve into a box and slip something into his pocket. It looked like a gold watch. He straightened up—then he saw me standing there.

'Get *back*, you crazy cow, or I'll have you charged with obstruction!' he shouted.

'Wu Ying stole a brooch of mine, and I want it back,' I retorted.

‘And you can’t have it back. It’s *evidence* until he’s convicted. Now get back to the other side, before I throw you there!’

Well, thought I, there’s one little piece of *evidence* right there in your pocket that’s not waiting for Wu Ying’s conviction. But I thought better of sharing that observation with our nice policeman.

I returned to the other side, Rogers a few minutes later. ‘There’s a swag of stolen goods there,’ he reported. ‘But not the cash. I shall organise a proper search party as soon as I am able.’

With that, he kicked the second tree he’d cut for the bridge into the chasm. ‘Don’t want him to know we’ve been prowling around in his little den, do we now?’

Ye gods and little fishes, was there *no* end to this man’s stupidity? Did he think Wu Ying would imagine Pete had sprouted wings and *flown* away?

We carried Pete back down the track to the cart with great care. Luckily, we made it before he regained consciousness. Constable Rogers had tethered his horse to a tree near our cart—at least that’s what appeared to have been the case when he saw it wasn’t there. His horse had evidently been shanghaied by Wu Ying.

‘That filthy, thieving, fucking, yellow *devil!*’ he screamed. ‘I’ll choke the bastard with his own guts ... *arrrgh!*’ Rogers’ command of English failed him at that point. Fists flailing, he stamped on the ground with his heavy policeman’s boots, both feet simultaneously. I dared not look anyone in the eye for fear of bursting into laughter at the spectacle.

Rogers rounded on us, his face working like a beetroot stew on the simmer. ‘And you! *You* lot! Don’t just stand there like shags on a rock, I need a fucking horse. Take me to Moorina, that’s nearest, and I’ll *commandeer* one!’ Then he completely stunned me, stunned all of us.

He started weeping. ‘Not that any horse could ... ever ... replace ... *Horatio* ...’ After a couple of shuddering sobs, he looked up suddenly. Seeing us gaping at him, he hurriedly pulled himself together.

‘Now, you lot, get aboard that cart of yours. We’re going to Moorina.’

‘But what about Pete here? The nearest doctor’s at Thomas Plains,’ Lizzie shouted. ‘E’s more important than your fuckin’ horse!’

Which was true enough, wouldn't you think Hermione? But our Constable Rogers thought not. Head between his shoulders, chin thrust forward, '*Moorina*,' ordered he, through gritted teeth. So Charlie, who was at the reins, turned the horse back along Frome Road.

We hadn't gone a half mile when we heard galloping and a furious whinnying. A large chestnut stallion burst from a side track onto the road, just twenty yards ahead of us, looking confused. 'Christ Al-bloody-mighty!' Rogers stood up in the dray and bellowed ecstatically: '*Horatio*! My *Horatio*.'

He leapt from the cart and ran, arms outstretched, to the animal. The horse reared up on its hind legs, then sank on all fours, nuzzling against the constable, who patted its neck, and, if I am not mistaken, kissed it. Rogers drew back with a start, wiping his lips: 'The *bastard*!' he yelled.

We were now close enough to see the welts and blood along poor *Horatio*'s neck. They didn't look serious but they must have been painful.

'*Horatio* must've thrown 'im; he's a terror with anyone but me!' Rogers paused to pat the horse and kiss him again, while *Horatio* flared his lips and whickered. Well, at least his horse loves him, I thought.

Rogers calmed down. 'It's as plain as day. *Horatio* took to the bush, bucking and rearing and threw the little yellow fucker, or else he wiped 'im off his back. Either way, I hope it fucking hurt.'

'In which case, Wu Ying might be lying unconscious in the bush near here.' A suggestion I immediately regretted—for Rogers ordered a search party.

'My clever *Horatio* will know where,' Rogers chuckled. Inspecting *Horatio* for more damage and finding none, Rogers swung into the saddle, and bending low, whispered something into the horse's ear. Rogers let the reins go slack, and sure enough the horse walked off purposefully, like it knew where it was supposed to be going.

'Follow me, you two,' he shouted over his shoulder to Jack and Charlie.

Lizzie was beside herself. 'Shit, we gotta get Pete to the doctor, Terry! That man's bloody mad.'

‘I agree. We’ll have to go back without them. Jack, Charlie,’ I called, ‘we must take Pete back to Thomas Plains. Sorry, but you’ll have to walk.’

They waved their assent. Constable Rogers reined in Horatio and turned back to us. High and mighty in the saddle, he loudly advised that he would be spending the night at Derby, where he would be able to make all the necessary arrangements for a *police guard* on the cave; that we were *under no circumstances* to return to the cave; and that he would return on the morrow to take our *individual statements*.

Rogers then clapped his heels against Horatio’s flank, causing the horse to break into a light canter and forcing Jack and Charlie into a fast run in order to keep up.

38

Evening, that very busy Monday the Thirtieth &c., &c.

Pete regained consciousness on the way back, and what with the jolting of the cart, he was in quite some pain. We managed to get Pete's address out of him, between groans. We stopped to see Dr. Hayes but he was on a call, his wife said. We told the doctor's wife that Pete Jackson had broken his legs, it was serious, and could Dr. Hayes come as soon as humanly possible? She took the message sniffily, saying Dr. Hayes would be unlikely to be able to make a house call before tomorrow but in the meantime, she advised us to obtain some laudanum. She suggested we try Ah Chee's.

Old WS did stock laudanum, of course he'd have some poppy, wouldn't he?, which eased Pete's pain almost immediately. We then took him to his home whereupon his mum promptly had the vapours while we tucked him up in bed. With the help of the laudanum, he cheered up pretty quickly and told us his story.

'I walked faster than youse. I stopped to look for the rest of youse, but you was nowhere in sight. That yellow fucker snuck up from behind me and walloped me on the back of me 'ead while I was lookin' down the track the other way. Near knocked me out. Turns out I'd stopped right where his bloody cave was. Before I knew what was 'appening he tied me arms behind me back. He pulled me to me feet, and at gunpoint, forced me to walk over the gap, like walkin' the fuckin' plank it was, me near shittin' meself. Soon as I was across and in the cave, he picked up a bloody great stick and smashed me across the shins. Christ, the pain!

"You shall not run away now, my young friend," he sneered. "You shall fetch me a pretty ransom." That's what he said, the blue-arsed bastard. Then he left me.'

'That's when he must have returned to the road and loosened the cart wheel,' I nodded to the others.

Pete continued. 'I think I musta passed out. When I came to it was daylight and he was back again. We 'eard some shoutin' in the distance. He grinned like a madman, all broken teeth, his mouth gaping open, while gagging me. Tell you what.

I dunno which was worse. The pain, or the stink of his breath. He then picked up a revolver and a bloody great rifle that he slung over his shoulder. He went outside. I 'eard him going *piew piew* like a kid playing cowboys. Next there's a bloody rifle shot and I recognize Lizzie screamin'! Oh shit, not me darling Lizzie, I thought, 'e's shot me darlin' girl!

'Yes, Petie he did. But only a scratch. Fuckin' 'urts but.'

I passed the laudanum to her. She took a sip and kissed Pete, wept a little over him, then off we all toddled in Ah Fung's cart back to Emu Flat.

By now it was nightfall, and in the gloom, just outside Emu Flat, we picked up Jack and Charlie who were trudging back from their search party.

'No, no Wu Ying,' Charlie smiled, 'but the horse stopped at a tree with low hanging branch not far down the track. He would not go further. Rogers found a mark on the bark of the branch, and blood on the ground. He said Wu Ying would have hit that tree, prob'ly with his nose, therefore there is much blood, but dried now. "That must've been hours ago," Rogers say, "He's gone now anyway, no good looking no more. You two piss off."' Charlie shrugged. 'So here we are, like he say, pissed off.'

When we arrived at our humble little dwelling, I asked Jack and Charlie to come inside. They got a decent fire going and put the kettle on while I put Lizzie to bed with a cold poultice round her head. Tell you what, the poultice suited her, truly it did, her nice, big, friendly face under a white turban-looking thing. The sight of her like that prompted me to recall Master Mou's prophecy.

The others brought in some mugs of hot tea and sat themselves around the bed. Before we got down to the serious business of discussing how to capture Wu Ying and the money, I said, 'Jack, Charlie, listen to this. You might make more sense of it than I can. We visited old Master Mou a couple of weeks ago, you know, at the Joss House.'

They nodded.

'Well, for fun, like, we shook some sticks ...'

'The *tseem*,' Charlie said.

‘Yes, well, whatever they’re called. Lizzie was told: “*Beware, beware of a fallen tree, lest some harm should come to thee.*” And guess what? It did, didn’t it? Wu Ying’s bridge was a fallen tree ...’

Charlie nodded solemnly. ‘When the god speaks he should be heard.’

‘Bullshit,’ Lizzie snorted. ‘You live in the bush and there’s fallen trees everywhere, to trip you over, to dong you on the nut. Chances are you would come to some ’arm because of a tree. Then you’d say, “See? That old bugger Mou knew a thing or two, didn’t he?” And if you don’t come to no ’arm, you’d forget he’d ever said it. My problem was not what he said or didn’t say, but that Wu Ying’s gun didn’t have a fuckin’ safety catch. Constable Rogers said so him-bloody-self.’

Jack was lost. Charlie translated for him and Jack said something in reply. ‘And you, Miss Teresa, Jack want to know what did the Master say to you?’

‘Oh,’ I paused. Do I tell him that I’m not pure in heart? Why should I not, Hermione? Whores usually aren’t. No, but teachers usually are and Jack’s my pupil. While I was thus debating with myself, Lizzie, God bless her heart and soul, spoke out even as I grimaced that she shut up.

‘E said: “*To achieve what you came here to find, be pure in heart and be pure in mind.*” Our Terry, *pure!*’ She laughed out loud at such an unlikelihood.

Charlie translated for Jack.

‘Then you will achieve what you came to find, Miss Teresa,’ Jack said, smiling such a *lovely* smile. The sort of smile I wish to heaven he’d given me on the bridge when he’d saved me.

Jack and Charlie had had dealings with the lugubrious Master Mou before, Charlie said. They were puzzled that the Master evidently knew Robert’s wife, Lucy her name was apparently. Now that *was* interesting. I thought it might be a link in the puzzle of about the mystery woman from Derby.

But we soon left that for a much more imminent problem: Wu Ying and his haul. We tossed this around, getting nowhere, until Jack’s face lit up. He yabbered to Charlie in Cantonese. Charlie nodded repeatedly then enlightened us.

‘Wu Ying will return to his cave. He left too many good things. Jack has a plan. We go back very early tomorrow morning, before Wu Ying returns and before that stupid policeman. We take a saw. We saw part-way through the bridge. When Wu Ying is halfway across it break under his weight. He fall onto rocks below and killed maybe. If not, we drop him again until he is.’ He laughed. ‘We squash that fly.’

‘Hey, that’s murder,’ Lizzie’s eyes were popping out from under her turban. She didn’t half look winsome.

‘It will not look like murder. It will look like he fell off the bridge.’

‘But what if he’s back in his cosy little cave already? That’s easily possible...’

Jack interrupted me, Charlie translated. ‘He say we need a gun. He has a friend who has a gun.’

‘Indeed you have, Jack.’ I turned my back while I delved into my undergarments. I turned round holding a *warm* little revolver in my hand.

‘Is this what you need, Jack?’

39

Jack and Charlie were up before dawn. Two hours later, they were standing opposite Wu Ying's cave. The god Kwan Ti must have been watching over them to ensure justice was meted out: Constable Rogers had yet to post the police guard, and the bridge was up on their side, down on the cave side. Wu Ying could not have been at home.

Charlie called in a ghostly voice that carried. '*Wu Ying, Wu Ying!*'

Silence.

'That settles it,' said Charlie, 'First, let's widen the bridge.'

The men got to work, extracting a leaf from Constable Rogers' book. They felled another tree conveniently close to the existing bridge and sufficiently long to span the chasm. They worked the tree until it lay alongside the other.

'Right. I'm going across to collect some goodies,' Charlie said. 'Cover me, in case he turns up.' He carried two large sacks with him.

Jack remained hidden, watching the track for signs of Wu Ying's approach. While Charlie was away, Jack fondled the little revolver that Miss Teresa had given him, making sure he knew how to fire it. He wondered how she of all people had obtained such an article of death. Maybe she is not so pure after all! He smiled at that thought. He totally disapproved of his teacher behaving in such a dangerous manner, but how he admired her! And how badly he felt about the way he had reacted when she had embraced him after so bravely crossing the bridge, the very same bridge that they were now going to destroy. It was as if any bridge between him and Miss Teresa had now been destroyed—except that one bridge of the English language, which spanned the impersonal gap between teacher and pupil. Unfortunately, his feelings for Miss Teresa had well surpassed those of a pupil for a teacher, but such feelings were beyond his ability to express.

Charlie returned with his sacks bulging. He winked at Jack, left the sacks with him, and returned halfway along the bridge with the saw. Kneeling on their newly hewn tree, Charlie leaned across and made the saw-cut on the underside of Wu Ying's original bridge. Returning to Jack, Charlie despatched the second tree in

like manner to the way Constable Rogers had: he kicked one end into the chasm. The tree hit the bottom with a muffled *boom*.

They sat down to wait, well hidden, only yards away from the crossing.

‘Charlie, if the bridge doesn’t break, I’ll shoot him. Even if I miss, the shock will cause him to fall off. But leave that to me. That’s my job, okay?’

Around midmorning, Wu Ying appeared, darting from tree to tree, peering out, grimacing, then darting to the next cover point. As he drew closer, Jack could hear him muttering to himself in Hakka. Jack peered at his face, and sure enough, as Constable Rogers had predicted, Horatio the horse had done his job well. Wu Ying’s nose was a squashed tomato, his ragged shirt caked with dried blood. Wu Ying reached for the bridge and lowered it to the ground. Jack and Charlie were as still as rocks but as alert as cats. Jack aimed the gun, steadying his arm against a tree. Just in case.

Wu Ying stepped onto the bridge and commenced his walk across. Nearly halfway, there was a creaking sound. Wu Ying’s face jerked upwards, slashed with a sudden terror. He spun round, attempting to return but it was too late. The bridge slowly, then with increasing speed and a sickening *craaaack*, folded underneath him.

‘AIYAAAaaaaaaa!!!’ Three stick-like objects hurtled to the bottom of the chasm, but only two were sticks. The third was a man. The sound of the timber striking the rocks below boomed upwards, masking the softer thump of human flesh.

Charlie and Jack jumped from cover, shouting their delight. They hugged each other, each banging the back of the other.

‘Well done, Older Brother,’ Jack said. ‘My only regret is that I didn’t kill the bastard with my own hands.’

They peered over the edge to confirm their work. A spread-eagled Wu Ying was nowhere to be seen. They spied one part of the bridge, but it was hard to tell: the bottom had logs lying there aplenty. But no body of a man, no crumpled blue clothing.

They stared at each other, then each peered downwards from a different angle.

Charlie, his face white, moved back to Jack, tapping him on the arm and pointing. Wu Ying, seemingly indestructible, was climbing back up! Jack, feet astride, both hands gripping the revolver butt, took aim. Charlie pushed the barrel aside, waving his other hand horizontally.

‘Back,’ he whispered urgently. ‘Let him climb right up. Then you cannot miss. You *must* not miss! He must have the devil himself inside him.’

Jack stepped back, yards from the edge. He knelt, both hands still gripping the revolver, one elbow on his knee for support. He was aiming steadily at the spot where Wu Ying must appear, if he made it at all. After a long while, they heard laboured breathing and mumbled curses. Two hands reached for the bushes at the rim. Slowly, Wu Ying appeared, his face screwed up with pain. Reluctantly, Jack admired his enemy’s perseverance, his fortitude. But only for a moment. His mind switched to that awful scene so long ago yet still so vivid in his mind’s eye.

‘Wu Ying,’ he called. Softly, almost tenderly.

39

Wu Ying was in excruciating pain. He felt worse than he had when locked in the dreadful *cangue*. Surely he must have broken several bones in that fall, yet he was still able to climb back up. The climb had utterly exhausted him, each move a crunching of bones. And now, inexplicably, he found himself staring into the barrel of a .22 Smith and Wesson that he knew must have been his own. Above the barrel was the intent face of that silly young Cantonese he'd teased on the boat.

'Remember me, Wu Ying?'

What a fool of a question. Of course he remembered him. But what had that young simpleton to do with his present predicament? What was *he* doing with what looked like his own gun? Wu Ying knew better than to argue with someone holding a gun aimed directly at his head. Self-preservation was a stronger instinct in Wu Ying than in most people.

'Yes, of course. On the boat. Just put that thing away and help me out. I am injured.' Badly injured, he told himself, but he never would admit to an adversary that he could be at such a disadvantage.

'Yes, on the boat. But we met long before that, do you not remember the village of Kam Fu Tsuen? You ...' Jack's voice broke, the gun barrel wavered.

Wu Ying's eyes widened at the name of that village, so long ago. But no one survived that ... Ah yes, the egg he'd left intact! It must be he. As he noted the gun barrel waver in its aim, he gathered his muscles to spring, but he was unable to summon the strength to turn the tables. Instead, he stared back, trying to fit this raging, weeping face with that of that little kid. Truth to tell, he didn't recognise the face before him now as that of that snotty little brat. That had been long ago. And how right the Heavenly King had been: what a mistake to have disobeyed his maxim!

'Jack, you must do it now! *Quickly!*' he heard another voice shout in fear.

Wu Ying painfully looked to the side. A few yards away, a man was pointing to him. Ha, it was that do-gooder on the boat with the plucked queue—and he looked

terrified! Wu Ying smiled to himself. So his power still worked. Slowly he ground his head back to face the intact egg that he should have destroyed years ago. Wu Ying was dismayed to see the revolver was now rock steady, pointing at his forehead.

Wu Ying's foot found a solid tree root. With one hand clutching a branch, he held the other up as a gesture for mercy, for a pause in execution at least. The last thing a cunning Fly, let alone a truly devoted Hairy Thief, could possibly want would be to die at the hand of what should have been one of his own victims. His words came slowly, painfully. 'No, my friend, I think, *ugh*, you are mistaken ... I ... I was never anywhere *urgh*, near Kam Fu Tsuen. In Kwongtung Province you mean? No ... *ugh* ... '

His foot slipped, his grip loosened, he scabbled at the edge. Jack stamped his boot over Wu Ying's flailing hand, pinning it, ensuring Wu Ying did not fall, not yet.

Jack was now standing directly above Wu Ying like the god Kwan Ti himself, in the act of exacting a terrible justice. The gun barrel bore down on Wu Ying like the eye of death. The eye moved closer and closer, until it was like a third eye inserted between his own two eyes. Minutes seemed to pass.

It wasn't minutes. It was seconds.

Then it was eternity.

40

Monday the Seventh of October, 1889

We are all bleeding heroes!

The inquest was held in the Public Bar—which included the sole table that constituted our Parlour Bar—at the All Nations. The local magistrate, Thomas Walters Esq., a rich farmer when he wasn't magistrating, acted as coroner. He ruled that Wu Ying's death was 'death by misadventure'. He read from his report.

'I find that the bridge to his hideaway collapsed, dashing him onto the rocks below. Mr. Jack Yang and Mr. Charlie Lam, who happened to be in the vicinity, are to be commended for trying to save the poor fellow by lowering a rope.

Unfortunately, the man Wu Ying was unable to grasp it with sufficient tenacity. He was raised halfway up the cliff face from the bottom of the gully but failed to maintain his grip; he fell down the awful abyss yet again. He was killed by the impact of his second fall, his back broken, his face unrecognisable. These two honest men are also to be commended for handing over goods, believed to have been stolen, which they found in the deceased's cave.

'Yet, despite the most diligent of searches under the direction of Constable Matthew Rogers, the money the unfortunate Mr. Ying had misappropriated could not be found. Constable Rogers voiced the opinion that the suspected accomplice, a Mr. Ah Fung, had absconded with the funds, it being unlikely that the deceased would have had sufficient time or opportunity to convert any money before his untimely demise. I agree that that is likely to be the case and I so rule. The next task is to find this wretched accomplice Fung, but that is a task for the police. It is not the business of today's deliberations.

'I also commend the two young ladies, Miss Teresa Conway and Miss Elizabeth Wiggins, for following so assiduously the directions issued by Constable Rogers to scrutinise the area as they returned whence they came. It was because of his directions that the ladies deduced where the miscreant was hiding his prisoner, the unfortunate Master Jackson. If it was not for these two ladies, it is entirely within the realm of possibility that young Jackson would not be with us here today. I would

like to commend the two ladies for trying to apprehend the miscreant when he fled his hideaway, but I fear in this respect they behaved rashly, most rashly. Miss Wiggins suffered a bullet wound to her scalp, a mere graze most fortunately, but so easily may it have been otherwise. One must opine that the sore head she received for her pains may have taught her, nay taught both ladies, that such rash behaviour ill befits the fairer sex.'

The pompous old fart interrupted his meanderings at this point to smile in what he no doubt thought was a fatherly way at Lizzie—fatherly my arse, if I may make to be so bold—who sat there looking so innocent and vulnerable with a nice clean bandage around her head. The leering old goat then wound up.

'Finally, I have to commend Constable Rogers for the leadership he displayed throughout, and for his conduct of the investigation in general. He left not a stone unturned in his zealous endeavours to get to the bottom of this unusually complicated case. The laudable consequence is that we know exactly how this criminal Ying, and his accomplice Fung, preyed upon the good nature of our citizens. One must voice the thought that the criminal who masterminded the affair has received perhaps more than his just deserts. It was a horrible way to die, most dreadful. But one must also put voice to the opinion that at least our peace-loving and upright community is well rid of this pestilent fellow, with his fraudulent contracts that so misled our good citizens.'

So everyone came out smelling ever so sweet, except The Fly and Ah Fung. Constable Rogers in particular was more than happy with Magistrate Walters' summing up. Of course he was: it was an interpretation of events that arose from the constable's own evidence. Well, not quite the constable's *own* evidence. It needs to be placed on record that Lizzie and I suggested he visit us one fine evening prior to the inquest, in order—amongst other things—to agree that we place the best construction for all concerned on these complex matters. Moreover, as I said before, girls in our profession need to keep on the right side of those representing the law wherever we are able. In this case, it was easy.

Despite our stormy introduction to the blustering Constable Rogers, we concluded as excellent friends, especially Lizzie and *Matthew*, as he is now known to us twain.

As soon as the inquest had concluded, we held our own deliberations. Jack suggested to Ah Fung that it would be inappropriate, not to say dangerous, if he remain concealed in their hut for any longer. He could be recognised, Jack pointed out, and his whereabouts reported at any time. He should in his own interests return forthwith to tin mining, at a different site, under a different name. As he hadn't sold any vegetables in Ringarooma, he might sign on with the large mining company there. Or if he felt that Ringarooma was too proximate, Emu Bay, many *many* miles distant, might be a safer destination. In any event, he would as a miner have no further use for his horse and cart. Jack proposed to give him a fiver for it, the horse and cart to be donated to Henry and Bing. I thought Jack a little harsh. I felt Ah Fung, poor fool, had suffered enough. He had been tricked at the onset of his dealings with Wu Ying.

'He trick me when we first arrive. He give me only five pound for fifteen pound! He bastard man.'

'We Chinese have a saying for that sort of man,' Charlie said, '*guo he chai qiao*. It means "dismantle the bridge after crossing it". Use a friend then destroy him when his use is over.'

'Which is literally what Wu Ying did to the bridge to his cave!' I chuckled.

'Not Wu Ying,' laughed Charlie, 'I did that one good and proper.'

'Anyway,' said I, 'back to the other dismantled bridge, poor old Ah Fung here. A fiver's nowhere near enough for his horse and cart! If he possessed fifteen notes at the beginning of his misadventures, he should be paid same for the horse and cart. At least he's back to where he started. No, make that twenty. He deserves *something* for what he's undergone.'

All agreed that there was poetic justice in such a resolution, including Ah Fung himself.

The people of Moorina and district, I suggested, would be delighted to see their favourite market gardeners, Henry and Bing, able not only to extend their gardens with new irrigation channels, but to peddle their wares with a horse and cart.

Old WS had disagreed when I put it to him that Pete be paid recompense whilst convalescing in the call of duty. No workee, no payee, said he; or words to that effect. But Pete should receive *something* in order to live and to cover his medical expenses, should he not? And should not *all* of us likewise be recompensed for the time we had spent on this wretched business when we could have been earning good money for ourselves? And should not Lizzie, too, receive *additional* compensation for her injuries?

Indeed so, it was agreed by all.

Are you, dear Hermione, puzzled at how we could meet these ever-expanding bills? Let me explain.

When Jack and Charlie returned home on the afternoon of Wu Ying's death, they brought with them a blood-stained money belt and a couple of sacks of loot. They were reticent about the details of how they obtained the money belt and how it came to be in that condition, but the general picture was clear enough. The important point was that inside said money belt was £163 in notes, about thirty bob in coins, and a small abacus bespattered with what *could* be blood.

Lizzie pounced on the abacus. 'What's this 'ere?' she demanded.

Charlie explained that it could be used to carry out very large calculations in a trice.

'Cipherin' you mean?' she asked.

Charlie shrugged, showing her how to multiply 2,543 by 124 in ten seconds.

'Corlumme, I want *that*,' she breathed. Lizzie is a strange girl.

That small item having been accounted for thus, we turned to the more complex issue of the surprising amount of money in Wu Ying's money-belt. It was considerably more than what he would have gained from his racket in veggies. We wondered where that had come from—or rather, from whom it had come. Given this imponderable, we decided not to redistribute the contents of Wu Ying's money-belt amongst the known victims, after all. It wouldn't be fair, would it, seeing as how we

didn't know the party or parties to whom we should reimburse those notes superfluous to the veggie deal. 'So,' I suggested, 'let us therefore *exclude* said notes from the reckoning.'

No-one demurred.

'This leaves £58, approximately, as the ill-gotten gains from the veggies to be distributed—the £35 or more he had probably obtained from their sale, plus £17 from Ah Chee and £16 from Hilary, less the £5 each for Wu Ying's unnecessary consideration, silly man. Because of the damage to their garden, Henry and Bing's recompense would have to be more than they were owed just for the sale of their fruit and vegetables. I suggest therefore that we allocate the £58 to Henry and Bing to set them back up on their feet.'

I stopped and looked around all their faces. I read assent, if tinged with puzzlement.

'Now for the matter of compensation for loss of earnings *in re* us all; and in addition, compensation for injuries sustained by Pete and Lizzie. Allowing £15 each for loss of earnings—who knows how much tin Jack and Charlie might have garnered had they not been distracted with this distressing business?—and an additional £15 for Pete and £10 for Lizzie for their pains, and oh yes, Ah Fung's £20, there is precious little left to distribute to Wu Ying's remaining victims, is there not?'

'Hang on,' Lizzie called, 'that don't add up.'

'No, it doesn't. You are right. But such details do not matter one split pea. You see, if we divided the remainder, *whatever* that might be, between Hilary and Ah Chee, mean old man, they would receive *less* than they were owed by Wu Ying. I calculate each would in that case receive about £6 each, which is significantly less than their original investments of £16 and £17, respectively. Such an eventuality would require *much* in the way of explanation. If the money was recovered, would not Hilary and Ah Chee demand the *entire* amount of their loss? But how could they, given the *superior* demands of natural justice? Agreed?'

'Agreed,' said Lizzie in a bored voice. Charlie grunted.

‘How then,’ I continued my argument although I was talking to myself, ‘might we account to the aggrieved others, to wit Hilary and Ah Chee, for the shortfall in their justly due?’

‘I dunno. How?’ Lizzie asked. Charlie perked up a bit, raising his eyebrows.

‘By invoking he who has mysteriously disappeared. To wit, Ah Fung! *He* has to be the culprit,’ I cried. ‘He must have swiped it. As indeed, on the basis of Constable Rogers’ evidence, Magistrate Walters has so ruled!’

Daylight dawned on Lizzie’s and Charlie’s faces.

Now let us turn to the other matter of divvying up the loot that Charlie had had in his sacks. Constable Rogers had swiped some pocketable trinkets on his inspection, as I had witnessed, but there was much remaining, as Charlie discovered with a less cursory search than that of the worthy policeman’s. We also had to leave *something* of value both for Constable Rogers himself and for reporting his official finds. This required some *negotiation* with said constable. His moustache bristled, his piggy little eyes gleamed ice-blue, when he discovered—as discover he must—that we had disobeyed him by returning to the cave and helping ourselves. He was manifestly *less* than pleased at this intelligence. To ease matters, I brandished the stick of reporting the *true* manner of his conduct of the investigation, while Lizzie supplied a succulent carrot of *quite* another nature.

So we invited our now very *biddable* constable to The Ceremony of the Sharing of the Loot. Charlie opened the sacks for inspection. And guess what little Terry espied? My very own brooch staring up at me! I leapt upon it with a grateful cry.

Some items were genuinely valuable, such as gold hunter watches, some new fangled fountain pens with gold nibs, some fine pieces of jewellery, tools and instruments of various kinds, ornaments, a couple of wicked looking hunting knives, a sword, a Springfield rifle, a muzzle loading musket and two more revolvers, two pocket compasses, books... &c. Other items were of little *commercial* value: notes, scribblings, photographs, letters, &c., which the swinish Wu Ying seemed to have kept for no better reason than that they were of personal value to other people.

When we looked closer we saw some of the watches had initials on them, some with Chinese characters. Jack inspected each one.

‘Wong King Chee,’ he read out. ‘This watch belong Mr. Ah Chee’.

‘I’ll take that,’ I called.

Constable Rogers looked up at me sharply. ‘You have no right to that. That goes into the “official” pile.’

‘Oh please, Matthew, I am a friend of his and of his lovely wife. He would appreciate it *so* much if I gave it to him personally.’ I smiled my smile of velvet iron.

He grunted and shrugged. ‘Only this once. In future, I and I alone shall take possession of all articles bearing the name of the rightful owner and deliver them *officially* to the person or persons so named.’

Official business over, we bade farewell to Matthew, the representative of the law, all parties finally pleased with a good day’s work well done.

The four of us repaired to Pete’s bedside, with a bottle of port wine and a nice anonymous gold hunter for Pete that had somehow become *separated* from the official haul. We sat around his bed and charged our glasses.

I proposed a toast. ‘To Ah Fung!’

‘The flyblown Ah Fung!’ Lizzie added.

I explained to Jack and Charlie that ‘flyblown’ also meant sucked dry, as in cheated.

As indeed Ah Fung had been; and by The Fly himself.

**WHEN THE WATER GOES DOWN
THE STONE EMERGES**

41

Wednesday the Ninth of October, 1889.

More glad tidings of great joy: my lessons are official! After the praise we received at the inquest, I spent time and money at Old WS's establishment. Old WS had of course attended the inquest and had therefore become acquainted with the knowledge that I had been party to the demise of he who had cheated him. That raised me *considerably* in his estimation.

In the course of our discussions, I once again tried to explain how *assiduous* his employee Pete had been in trying to catch The Fly—even to placing his own life at risk—with the sole object of returning to his employer the latter's lost shekels. I put it to Old WS, with all my gentle tact, that some might see an argument existing to the effect that Pete, his zealous servant, should remain on his payroll while *hors de combat* on his master's behalf. Old WS remained *unconvinced* by any such argument, but I could see he took quite a shine to me. He took even a greater shine when I produced his watch.

'Ah Miss Conway, my precious watch! I miss when that Wu Ying leave shop. Thank you so much.' He stepped back, clasped his hands together and bowed three times.

And with that to sweeten his generosity when my eloquence had sadly failed, I went on with my second request. 'Mr. Ah Chee, I would be very honoured if I could give your dear wife English lessons—perhaps to tell her some facts of Tasmanian life from a *woman's* point of view,' here I smiled modestly, managing even to squeeze out a faint *blush*, 'especially come the day when she is, ahem, expecting. That is with *child*. So many things I could tell her, Mr. Ah Chee, important things.' He started to react, but I held up my hand. 'And it would be my very real pleasure. No charge, Mr. Ah Chee, none whatsoever.'

Whereupon, his face formed a grin comprising nested square wrinkles. 'You are kind, Miss Conway, very, very kind.'

So from then on I could play a straight hand in my visits to May. I was May's teacher, friend, Older Sister and, God help me, possible *midwife*! As I'd

admitted to Constable Rogers, my tongue does indeed run sometimes faster than my good sense. At least, however, I could visit my dear little friend May without resort to subterfuge. She made me feel like a broody hen but I cannot explain why I felt so towards her. Perchance she *is* you, Hermione, the younger sister I never did have. And as I never did have a sister, then *of course* you could be Chinese!

However we may unravel these complications, my dear Hermione, you *do* make me realise how much I greatly prefer teaching as a means of support than providing temporary relief to Chinamen—or to any man.

Except perhaps one.

After the first English lesson with May, Ah Yee had thankfully decided she'd save face more effectively if she participated no longer. All she had revealed thus far was her ignorance. So I was left alone with May, who under my sole tutelage galloped ahead like a prize little racehorse.

But there were other things about May that worried me. How she related to Old WS was one. He seemed to rule her private life down to who might or might not even *visit* her. Especially was I curious as to their wedding night. Poor child, she must at the very least have been frightened out of her wits! Then there was the matter of her bound feet. She sometimes seemed in pain when she tottered around in her tiny little shoes.

Foot-binding seemed to be a terribly *cruel* thing to do to girls. I promised myself that I would find out in her next lesson in a week's time.

Wednesday the Sixteenth of October, 1889.

Off we went sounding words, me in English, she in Chinese; I then spelled them and she wrote them down, just like I did with Jack. She was a fast little learner and moreover, I myself was learning some Chinese into the bargain. (But not, Hermione, Chinese characters. Too complicated.)

We started with head, mouth, eyes, neck, and so on, progressing downwards to her feet. I touched my foot first. 'Foot,' I said.

'*Geuk*,' she said.

I touched her foot. 'Bound foot,' I said.

'*Tjart geuk*,' she said. Then she added, '*toong*.'

'*Toong? M'meng*.' That means 'no savvy': but you understand that by now, Hermione, don't you?

May pinched my arm, so hard that it hurt. '*Toong*,' she repeated.

'I show you.' She sat and removed one of her tiny shoes, then a sock, then she unwound a coloured bandage.

Phew, the *pong*! Something like filthy socks and rotting meat. But that was nothing to what I *saw*. Her foot was buckled, about three inches from heel to toe, the toes tucked under the arch of her foot. The flesh was dead looking some toes were even broken away, like tiny, white, dead fish in aspic.

I nearly vomited. My sweet, beautiful, little friend—so *mutilated*. 'How ... ? *Why ... ?*'

In fractured English, embellished with Chinese and mime, May explained that when she was about five her mother wrapped a long bandage tightly around her feet, forcing her toes to curl under her instep. Daily, she was forced to walk up and down, up and down, so that her feet would be moulded into smaller and smaller shoes until the bones broke and those poor feet became sore and weeping hooves. Feet they were not. They must surely continue hurting her for the rest of her life.

Yet she seemed proud of how small they were. 'Husband like *very* much!' she smiled.

Inspection over, she wrapped her foot up again.

Then she turned the tables on me. She touched her crotch. '*Yamdouh*.'

I touched myself. 'Vagina.'

She looked at me so piteously. '*Yamdouh douh toong ah*.'

What *had* Old WS done to her? Given her the pox? Or just damaged her, like her feet were damaged? She was so tiny after all.

'Oh, *May*!'

I stood and flung my arms around her, my face against hers so she would not perceive the tears starting in my own eyes. But the way she hugged me back, so tightly, so desperate for someone who might *understand* her pain and her loneliness,

I couldn't stifle a sob. Sobs are catching. We were soon shuddering considerable *dampness* upon each other.

After a while she withdrew, but she stood gazing at me, imploring me, her eyes red and wet. It was the same cry for help that she had given me at the Scottsdale railway station. I was helpless then but now, *surely*, I could do something for her? But I had to find out what her problem was.

'May,' I said, *very* tentatively. 'My dear May, would you mind if I had a look ...?'

She turned her head away, her eyes screwed shut. She held one hand open at right angles to her face, as if to protect her modesty. With the other, she slowly pushed down her trousers a little.

She was no child. One glance at her dense little triangle told me what the trouble was: empurpled, brown contusions. She was badly bruised. Her pain came not from the pox, but from a man's selfish thrusting.

'May, pray do not be shy.' I knelt and gently touched her; immediately she shuddered.

'Relax, May, relax,' I soothed. I felt a splash on my head as a tear dropped while she was looking down at me. She was so *tense*, her stomach was sucked in tight, concave. Sweet Christ, her marital duty must be a continuing and absolute *torture*. I was reminded of Lizzie's initiation into the joys of sex. I couldn't do anything about May's poor feet, but I could help her in the love quarter: I was the expert there, after all.

'Thank you, May.'

I pulled her trousers up. I thought lubrication and relaxation had to be the order of the day. But how could I explain that to her? What she *really* needed to know was that her own body might experience pleasure when performing her marital duty. But whether or not such a turnaround would be possible with Old WS at the business end of the proceedings was to my mind doubtful.

I pointed to myself. '*Yau hai yamdouh*. You put cooking oil there.'

'*Yau?* Oil?' she repeated, her eyes lovely brown discs of astonishment.

I mimed how my finger would easily slide into an oiled fist but not into one that was not oiled. In any other context, this would have been *extremely* rude.

‘*Meng m’meng ah?* You understand?’

‘*Meng!*’ she giggled.

‘And you must *relax.*’ I didn’t know the Chinese for that and she wouldn’t have known the English. I signalled that she lie down on the floor.

I lay down beside her. I mimed being tense: stomach in, arched back, screwed up face—*aaaah*, relax. Tense—*aaaah*, relax. Body up, tight, face clenched—*aaaah*, body down. I made a floppy, smiling face.

‘Do this one hour each day,’ I ordered with all the authority of an old sawbones. Then to make sure she understood, I tried to find the right words: ‘*Mui yat yatgor*, er ...’ Bugger.

‘Hour?’ she asked.

‘Yes, every day one hour.’

I now had to be *very* careful, but I was sure that May had dire need of what I was about to impart. Glancing quickly at the door, I raised my dress. I touched myself through my bloomers. Using my fingers and thumb, I tried to represent what lay beneath the layers of my clothing. ‘See, May, here is the lady in the boat. She likes to be patted on her little bald head.’ I licked my fingertip and moved it slowly over what lay beneath.

Puzzled, she looked closely at what I seemed to be doing. She smiled suddenly, imitating my movements.

‘Yes, yes, May, but slowly, *maandi*. Good, good.’

I *thought* she had the right idea. Her rosy cheeks and glowing eyes would have suggested so. But Dr Conway’s consultation must perforce draw to a hasty conclusion; I dared continue no longer. I stood, patting my dress into place.

‘You do that in bed at night before Mr. Ah Chee come to bed. Bye-bye, May. I see you next week.’ I headed for the door.

‘Tleesa, wait!’

I turned round. She tottered up to me and hugged me tightly. She kissed me and murmured, ‘Thank you.’

As I wandered the long trek home, I pondered many things. This *awful* business of foot binding. It seemed that it was performed only for the gratification of men! I simply did not understand this. Why did women, *mothers*, do this to their daughters?

I concluded, as I topped the last rise and began the descent into Emu Flat, that just as I had begun to instruct dear little May in the arts of love, there was probably another innocent in sore need of such instruction: *viz.* Jack Yang. But precisely how I might achieve *that* presented something of a problem.

He seemed not the slightest bit interested in matters of the flesh. Or maybe it was simply that he had not the slightest interest in the flesh of yours truly.

42

Friday the Eighteenth of October, 1889

As I passed the All Nations I noticed a woman sitting on the bench where the coach dropped off and picked up passengers. She was hunched up, dabbing her eyes with a grubby looking kerchief. As I paused, watching her, she raised her head. Her eyes were wet and red-rimmed, her mouth puckered downwards; her expression was one of desolation. Her black hair fell from under her bonnet, dank and lifeless. She would be well into her forties, I thought, fifties even, but despite her aura of woe her features were still handsome.

I touched her on the shoulder. 'Is anything the matter? May I be of any help?'

'I just missed the Derby coach. Next one's tomorrow. I got nowhere to stay.'

'Perhaps Mr. Taylor could find you some lodging,' I nodded towards the All Nations. Missing the coach was inconvenient, certainly, but surely insufficient justification for this display of anguish.

'I'm skint.'

She didn't look exactly flush with the dubs, I had to admit.

'Do you have any friends in Thomas Plains?'

'Yairs, but 'e's away for a coupla days.' She nodded in the direction of the Joss House, just up the block. It had to be the mystery woman!

'You mean Master Mou?' I asked innocently.

'Yairs. 'Is bein' away has buggered me up good and proper. Thass why I got no cabbage.'

Well, well! I had nothing better to do in the next hour or so before walking home, and my nose sniffed a most *interesting* yarn. Was Master Mou in the habit of giving her money? What for, I wondered, surely not for *that*? Not after what he'd said to me.

'Like a drink?' I asked her, nodding towards the pub. 'My shout. By the way, I'm Terry, Terry Conway.'

‘Flora. And my word, yes. She could do with a good stiff ’un, could the old Flora.’ She smiled for the first time. She didn’t offer her surname.

As we entered the bar, Bertie raised his eyebrows on seeing me with Flora, but ever the diplomatic host, he just smiled and nodded. He brought our drinks to the Parlour Bar table before we’d even ordered: a double gin for Flora and my usual port and lemon.

I started the conversation by telling Flora how Lizzie and I had wandered into the Joss House and what the Master had said the sticks meant.

‘Just what ’e would say,’ she sniffed.

I raised my eyebrows.

‘You’re on the game, aren’t you? Now don’t get all huffy: course you are. It’s obvious, isn’t it, what would a single girl, or a pair of youse, be doing in a place like this? Anyway, I know all about *that*.’

This sounded promising. ‘Like another?’

A couple of hours and several gins later, I pieced together her story—and here it is, Hermione, with a teensy bit of polishing on my part.

Flora was a Launceston girl. Over twenty years ago, when she was only nineteen—my age! Gawd, I hope I don’t look like her when I’m forty—she stopped for a drink at the *Royal George* in Brisbane Street: ‘Well, you never know *who* you might meet, do you now?’ she said archly, interrupting her story.

Who she met was a Chinese gold miner who was tall and handsome and ‘looked like ’e’d be hung like a horse.’ He looked even more attractive, she admitted with a wry grin, when he paid for his meal with gold-dust. He said his name was Ching Mou, or something like that.

George told her he’d just arrived from the Ballarat goldfields, forced out by the white miners who had ganged up on the Chinese. He’d heard that gold had been struck in a place called Mangana, somewhere in the north of Tasmania, and that was where he was headed, after kitting himself out in Launceston.

Flora spent that night with him and the next and the next; until in fact he went off to his mine in Mangana, which turned out to be out Fingal way. By this

stage, George had told her that he loved her and asked her if she would join him in a few weeks, after he'd built a house for them to live in. She said she thought she was in love with him too, but, Hermione, given the turn of events I imagine she was also taken with the idea of living in a gold mining town. Apparently she was in for a rude shock.

As Flora alighted from the coach in the Fingal town centre to be enveloped in George's waiting arms, she realised she was overdressed in her large hat, long dark frock, with lacy cuffs and collar. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the coachman raise his eyebrows at her being thus greeted by a scruffy looking miner. She could tell what he was thinking—that the miners had clubbed together for a classy trollop.

Mangana was normally two hours' solid walk up a flat dusty track, but for this very special occasion George had hired a pony and trap. The driver also displayed the same reactions as the coachman. For the second time she experienced being seen as a miners' whore, and Chinese miners to boot. She began to regret her decision. She was now wondering what she'd let herself in for, living in a camp of Chinamen with a man she'd known for less than a week. These thoughts weren't helped by the scenery. The bush was pretty enough beside the track, but in the background reared the dramatic slopes and plateaus of Ben Lomond. Flora said that she felt they were like a prison wall, the closer they approached them.

When they arrived at the campsite, George helped her off the trap. He then stood proudly, waving his hand at the rough bark huts and lean-tos randomly scattered in a large clearing. One hut stood apart from the others but it was different not only in its isolation. Larger than the rest, it was made from split shingles rather than from whatever came to hand. It had a proper door and a chimney at one end. George opened the door with a flourish and stood aside for her to enter.

Inhaling stale wood-smoke and dust Flora was quickly enveloped by strange Chinese smells. She looked around in the gloom, espying George's rough but lovingly made furniture.

'Oh, my *gawd!*' was all she could say.

Flora had thought that living in the country would be much like living in Launceston except there'd be more trees and less people—a small price to pay for the prospect of untold wealth. But as soon as she had entered the door of George's hut, she revised her opinion drastically.

There were many things for which she hadn't contended. The split shingles provided an attractive nesting place for 'them bloody great tryanchullers', as she called huntsman spiders. She was familiar with them in Launceston, but here they were bigger and were *everywhere*. George assured her they were harmless. 'Look,' he said, as he picked one up in his hand and let it run over his face. She screamed. She assured me that it was a week before she could look at one of the things without screaming.

But she did like some things: the green and red flash as parrots simpered past, the liquid song of the currawongs with their clever yellow eyes, and the triumphant *nan-ying nan-ying* screech of the wattlebirds and their funny hanging bits. She clung to George in terror the first night she heard the thumps of the possums on the roof, but he took her by the hand and gently led her outside with a lantern to show her how cute the furry possums really were. She delighted in watching the occasional wallaby and badger cautiously exploring beyond the safety of the bush. There were no wallabies in Launceston, or badgers.

Flora thought she might go for walks in the bush while George worked. But even a few minutes from the settlement took her into depths where the bush became dark and threatening. It grew in damp tangles, it smelt like wet socks, and she was afraid of getting lost. Once she nearly trod on a snake, which left her mouth dry and her heart pounding for an hour. Snakes terrified her even more than the tarantulas. Flora was a city girl. Gold mine or no gold mine, Mangana was no place for her.

Unfortunately, it was just the place for George. His own skills at extracting alluvial gold had been developed at several sites on the Mainland. He was good at judging what was worth working and how to pan it most efficiently. He was doing better at Mangana than the other miners, and swiftly became their leader.

George was doing so well, in fact, Flora began to see the benefits of living in Mangana a shade longer than she'd originally intended, spiders or no spiders. She

was happy to sew gold into the seams of an old jacket; happier still at the speed with which that method of storing their riches became inadequate. The Bank of Van Diemen's Land had a branch at Fingal, so they opened a joint account there, despite the tut-tuttings of the manager at a man sharing an account with a woman. Flora explained that as a Chinaman Mr. George didn't understand bank accounts and needed her to manage it for him. The manager reluctantly agreed, muttering 'most unusual, most unusual', but in the end handed her a passbook that could be operated with either her signature or George's.

The highlight of Flora's week became those visits to Fingal, where they turned gold into pounds, shillings and pence. They deposited most of George's earnings in their bank account, and spent the balance at the General Store to stock up for the following week. Thus provisioned, they walked back to Mangana with their stores, she carrying a sack slung over her shoulder, George two sacks. Flora had fallen into a not-*too*-unpleasant routine, but promised herself it was not going to last much longer. However, when she missed one month, then two, she knew she must stay in Mangana until after the baby was born.

There were no midwives for miles around. There was a doctor in Fingal, but he was as drunk as Chloe whenever she'd seen him. She wouldn't trust her precious child to his boozy fumbblings. However Flora had made friends with Mrs. Thomas, whose husband ran the General Store and considering Fanny Thomas had already dropped seven sprogs, Flora reckoned she'd know all there was to know about having babies. Flora in turn passed all this newly gained knowledge to George, to inform him on his part in the proceedings when she was on her back, pushing and shoving and screaming and shouting like it was the end of creation, not its beginning.

Baby Lucy was born with nary a hitch.

George adored this giggling little creature, so pretty, so sweet natured. In fact, his cooing and kissing and cuddling whenever he was with the child were so excessive, Flora admitted it irritated her. Lucy had George's eyes, large and soft, his thick black hair, even as a baby; a dash of cream enriched her skin. When she grew up, Flora said she was just so *beautiful*. 'People used to say, "My oh my, isn't she

just like you, Flora?’ Not skitin’, Terry, that’s just what they did say, fair dinkum they did.’

George’s life was complete. ‘Here,’ he had told Flora, ‘is my home. I am making real money at last and I am in love with two females—my daughter and my ... *concubine!*’ He chuckled at placing Flora in that traditional Chinese role. Flora was not amused.

With Lucy safely delivered and thriving, Flora returned to singing her old song. ‘George, when are we going back to Launceston, eh? Tell me that. This’s no life for any girl. I can’t even talk to our neighbours, and not a woman amongst them! The only woman I know is Fanny Thomas way off in Fingal. I’m lonely George, I want to go back home.’

‘Yes, my dearest, I know. But there’s still plenty of gold here. Not yet. Not yet,’ he repeated with a gentle smile.

‘But George, this is no place to raise Lucy!’

He nodded, he understood. They would go soon. But month after month dragged on with no hint of their leaving.

Flora observed how the miners sucked up to George. They looked to him for advice on when to stop working the present lot, when to adjust the flow of water, when to do anything. When Flora strolled past the miners at work, with Lucy slung on her hip, many would stop work and bend over Lucy, stroking her cheek with a muddy finger and making clicking noises with their tongues, all the while looking slyly at George to confirm that he could see how they doted on his daughter. And she saw with a throb of anger how he *enjoyed* this role of authority and respect. Flora began to understand why he said they would leave soon, but somehow didn’t.

One day when George wasn’t around, a miner called to her as she passed: ‘Misse! Misse!’

She stopped. ‘Yeah?’

He approached and tickled Lucy with his finger. ‘*Leng Bibi.*’ Pretty Baby, she’d learned that much.

‘*Leng lui*’ he said, pointing, nearly touching her breast with a forefinger. He smiled, more warmly than usual. ‘Misse ... hey!’

A gold sovereign was held between his thumb and forefinger, right in front of her, and his other hand was under his shirt. He left her in no doubt about what he wanted her to do for that sovereign to be hers.

She flushed, jumping back a step. The bastard, how *dare* he assume he could treat her as if she was a common prostitute! Is that what they thought of her, all these polite little miners with their ready smiles—as anyone’s?

It wasn’t the first time Flora had been propositioned, not by a long chalk. But it made her realise just how precarious her position was in Mangana. She was one woman amongst all those sex-starved miners in a god-forsaken end of the earth. If they ganged together even George couldn’t control them. Yet—she admitted this after five gins—the miner’s gesture had excited her.

‘Not that I’d fuck *anyone* for money, mind,’ she insisted to me, ‘but I was sort of reminded of life in Launceston. Cor, the very thought of Launceston after that shitty little Mangana dump ... I was ’omesick, gawd I was ’omesick. And I musta ’ad the baby blues too, y’know, with Lucy only three months old and all. Anyway, I ’ad to get out, Terry, I fuckin’ ’ad to get out.’

So she did get out, taking Lucy and their bank passbook with her. She didn’t directly admit the latter, but minutes later she let slip that she had bought a house in Launceston so she must have.

‘Ah, so the house was for you and George when he’d finished at Mangana?’ I asked.

‘Er, no, not exactly. You see, ’e was down at the mine when I left. ’E wouldn’t have let me go otherwise,’ she said unconvincingly. ‘I left a little note, explaining it was all over.’

‘Poor George,’ I threw in. ‘So he lost his wife, his child and his savings.’

‘Suppose ya could look at it like that,’ she mumbled.

I sank back in my chair, looking out the window. I didn’t want her to see the expression on my face—it would have told her that my opinion of her had sunk rock bottom. There was a long silence. But whatever I thought of her past behaviour, I hadn’t received any answers to my own questions. I thought I’d be mercilessly direct with her.

‘You must have been quite wealthy when you went to Launceston to buy a house? And then later, with you and your daughter carrying on a *brisk* trade, I’ll be bound, in Derby ...’

She bridled, and for a moment I thought I’d been too harsh, but she hung her head, mumbling, ‘Don’t be like that, dearie. Lucy and I used to lose a *fortune* on the neddies. We ’ad to do *something* to keep body and soul together. Every Saturday we’d be at the Branxholm or the Pioneer races. That’s where we met a young Chinaman, Robert Ah Foy. He took a real shine to my beautiful Lucy, truly he did, and she to him. They loved each other, but my Lucy loved her mum too. She couldn’t leave me all alone in Derby while she lived with a bunch of miners in Emu Flat! You couldn’t blame ’er for that, could you now, seeing as how it was so *’orrible* for a woman, like I bin tellin’ you. So although she’d married Robert, it was like nothin’ ’ad changed, even the weekends were the same when Robert walked all that way just to see her, give her some ’ousekeepin’ and go to the races with us.’

‘So it was business as usual,’ I finished for her, ‘until ...’

She nodded. ‘Until Robert did for ’er ... she ... she ... oh dear.’ She stopped to dab her eyes. ‘I couldn’t return to the game, not after that. People looked at me like I was cursed. That’s when I went to see George. I thought ’e should know what had happened to his daughter.’

‘But hang on,’ I cut in, ‘how did you know that George was Master Mou and that he lived in Thomas Plains?’

‘Robert’d told us there was a monk at the Joss House here. The older miners’d told him Master Mou was a gold miner once, name of George. Pretty obvious, innit? I thought ’e was going to murder me when I told ’im. You shoulda seen his eyes! Like the bloody ’orrible eyes of those statues in that temple of ’is. But instead he sort of squatted down and shut his eyes, breathing deep and regular like. Then, bugger me, he stood up and said “Flora” and held out his arms to me! You could’ve knocked me down with a feather. So we’re friends, sort of, but no, not what you’re thinkin’. We’ve both done with that. He sees me as a poor lost soul, I think. ’E’s not wrong.’

Poor, stupid Flora. Despite the things she'd done, I did feel sorry for her, Hermione. But how about Master Mou! To forgive like that and help her out with cash when she needed it! Talk about Oriental otherworldliness. His wife and daughter were both whores, and both had paid a hideous price for their greed. Flora's story had certainly answered my own question about what he had meant with his little poem to me: *'To achieve what you came here to find, be pure in heart and be pure in mind.'*

For Flora and then Lucy to achieve what they had set out to find they had been greedy and unscrupulous. Do you know, Hermione, I don't want to sound bigheaded, but it looks like the Master guessed correctly that I was a whore, but that he could see—maybe it was my inner spirituality, ha ha—that I wanted something more out of life than just money, and that being so, I'd better be pure in heart, like his two women were anything but.

I looked at poor miserable Flora, sobbing quietly into her hankie again, and thought that if, despite everything, Master Mou could forgive her and be kind to her, who was I to judge?

Taking my leave, I pressed a quid into her hand, walked over to the bar and said to Bertie, 'Can you rustle up a bed for Flora and give her a decent feed? I'll settle with you later.'

43

Monday the Eleventh of November, 1889

It has been two months to the day since we arrived here in Emu Flat. Lizzie is seeing Pete, laid up as he is. Having finished the household chores, I found myself all on my little ownsome, on a lovely late-spring day, in a rather *contemplative* mood. So I decided to stroll along the road towards Moorina to a spot where the bush called to one, truly it did. If you sat quietly on a fallen trunk, after a while the bush came to life. The birds would carol away—they did that whether you sat still or not—but our little furry friends were rather more *shy*. One move, a light step on a twig, and a wallaby or a *darling* little poteroo would bound away in fright, hoppity-hop and a bunny's little white scut would disappear into the bush and the sweet little porcupines would curl up into a tight ball. I loved the wombats best. The men called them 'badgers' and ate them, which I thought was like eating your own pet dog.

Otherwise, when men weren't disturbing them, these animals were doing what they wanted to do. So how about Terry? Was she doing what she wanted to do, really and truly? Or were *men* disturbing her too? I'd set out from Hobart determined to escape the one-way journey that Lalla Rookh presented. But was renting my body to these Chinamen really any better? I thought it was—at first.

Business had been slow in starting. The notice on the window worked all too well, our few callers asking only about the English lessons. Then Pete's comings and goings may have dropped a hint, for clearly here was a lad in no need of English lessons. Our warm smiles and arch looks as we walked around the camp may have dropped an even clearer hint. We developed a clientele in a *dignified* manner.

The Chinese were not as loud about such activities as white men. They came one at a time, announced by a timid knock on the front door. I truly liked the shy young men, often seeking only to be held in soft female arms in their homesickness and loneliness, to weep while I stroked their faces and their hair. A few braggarts tried to prove their manhood in a *most* uncouth manner. These I discouraged as best I

could, but it was difficult. Could a shopkeeper refuse to serve someone they disliked? Lizzie handled this aspect of our business much better than I.

But now, now, there was Jack. Once my shy student, and now a *friend* after our amazing adventures, but no more than that. I was surprised at first that he did not seek my other professional services. Charlie had visited Lizzie, but strangely I almost disapproved of that, after what we'd been through as friends. And yes, now I thought about it, I would *not* want Jack to come to me as a customer. That would have spoiled whatever else was between us—even if by all indications that was not very much.

Love had not yet entered into it, although I do believe I could hear a sweet little Cupid tapping lightly on my heart's door. Could Jack possibly have been entertaining like feelings about me? Is that why he was so shy with me when I kissed him? I hope that had been the reason, for the alternative, that I repelled him, was too ghastly to contemplate. Saving my life was the act of a caring man; his subsequent rejection of the feminine me suggested that there was nothing personal to be read into that humane act. Was that because he knew of my other profession? I sensed that he was totally innocent of fleshly activities himself and would not take kindly to the knowledge that his fellow conspirator—and I had thought good friend—was *that* kind of working girl. Or perhaps he didn't know that about me, and was simply embarrassed at being kissed in public.

So in all, Hermione, all is not *entirely* lost as far as Jack is concerned but I shall have to tread very carefully.

My feelings for Jack have taught me one thing: I've been barely two months on the game here and I wish to cease. I do not like it, and now I have met Jack I do not like the effect it has upon my self regard. And then the horrible story of poor Flora and Lucy. What a stern warning to a girl on the game, as I now believe the infinitely wise Master Mou was telling me. How perceptively *oriental* of him!

Of course I told Lizzie about my meeting with Flora and how I put that together with the Master's saying. She however saw it as not applying to her. She is a soul without guile, and with that I wholeheartedly agree. A Flora or a Lucy my Lizzie would never be. Accordingly, I suggested to Lizzie that the partners in the

firm might specialise: me for teaching, her for the other. She was happy with that suggestion. She for her part had felt much ill at ease about the prospect of presenting herself as a teacher when she could neither read nor write.

All this points to one inevitable decision: I must make a living out of teaching. Although my big mouth had blithely waived May's fees for teaching and midwifery, my allotment from Wu Ying's haul has eased my financial concerns for the nonce. It gives me time to prepare myself for teaching: that nobler if *younger* profession.

I swung my legs off the log in readiness to return home. A series of thumps receding into the bush told me I had disturbed more wildlife than the bemused little wallaby who had just been sitting on a log.

44

Saturday the Twenty-third of November, 1889

Pete was on his back for six weeks, his legs in splints sticking up like a couple of tree trunks askew. Doctor Hayes pronounced the breaks were clean and should heal swiftly. Lizzie was over there most days. When his mum went out, she stripped off and they went at it as best they could. She usually returned hooting with laughter as she told me how they resolved the problem that day. Well, you picture the scene: his legs unbendable and supported from ropes over the rafters and Lizzie a big girl and all, but at least she was *inventive*.

When the doctor removed the splints, he ordered Pete to take a walk every day, starting gently with a couple of sticks and someone to lean on. Lizzie was that someone. She said they grew close, talking personally. They compared dads. Pete's dad was a bully and a drunkard but not as bad as a bully and a drunkard as Lizzie's. She told him all about that and why she became a working girl.

'Pete knows all about me. He knows me heart's untouched by any of me customers. Me heart belongs to Pete, and him alone I told him, even if I rent out me fanny from time to time.'

But in all this baring of soul, not to mention of body, not a word was said about their own future. Pete was beginning to worry me. I was certainly wrong about him being an accomplice of Wu Ying, but there was something about him that made it *reasonable* that I might entertain such a suspicion. I'll tell you what, Hermione, I saw a problem ahead for Lizzie.

'What about his future?' I asked, 'did he mention any plans he might have?'

'Not really. Only that he would be back delivering with Old WS. He then told me he needed a week on his own to sort things out, and he'd see me when he brought the next delivery to us. Business as usual, he said. Then he kissed me.'

That was over a week ago.

Monday, the Second of December, 1889

There was a bang on the door. 'Delivery!'

It wasn't Pete's manly bass but Dave's cracking squeal. Dave was Pete's replacement while he was laid up, but now Pete should have been back on the job. I looked carefully at Liz and feared there'd be more unpleasant surprises before the morning was out.

Dave was tall for his age, but his voice hadn't caught up with the rest of him. And no, Hermione, neither of us had given him a free sample, if that's what you may have been wondering. You have to draw the line somewhere. He was a happy lad today. He unpacked our provisions on the table, squeaking and gurgling the reason for his happiness.

'You'll never guess. Old Squarehead give me the job full time. No more school. Hooray!'

'What? Pete was told you was only fillin' in while he was crook!' Liz looked somewhat unhappy.

'Yeah, that's what I thought. But the boss reckons I'm a better worker. Anyway, 'e said Pete talks too bloody much. He blames Pete for losin' them veggies, y'know.'

'*Fuck him!*' Lizzie screeched. 'Pete risked his life, nearly got fuckin' killed, trying to get Ah Chee's fuckin' money back!'

'Jeezuz, don't blame me, lady. I only work 'ere!' Poor Dave backed away, holding his hands up as if to catch Lizzie's words before they hit him and did him a mischief.

'Yeah, sorry,' she relented, 'course I don't blame you. I blame that miserable, mean, treacherous lump of wombat shit.'

'Oh no, 'e's not to blame. The boss didn't sack Pete. No, don't you worry 'bout Pete.' Dave laughed between erratic squeaks. 'Nah, Pete resigned 'cause he told me he preferred to deliver for Allingham's. Suited old Ah Chee 'cause he 'ad me on the job anyway. Pete's been with Allingham's all week. More pay too he reckoned, so the old Pete's doin' alright for himself, don't you worry. You know Pete.' Squeaking his final squeak, he grinned again and left, Lizzie gaping after him.

She turned to me, her face crumpling.

‘Shit, Terry, the rotten bastard. And I don’t mean Old WS.’

Bloody Pete had even used Dave to deliver the ultimate in insults. It was as if he told Lizzie: ‘You don’t matter a toss, even if you did save me life and nurse me back to full working order ’cause you’re only a whore. Now you’ve outlived your usefulness, I’ll work for Allingham’s. That means I won’t be delivering at Emu Flat, so odds on I won’t run into you again—and I won’t have to explain a fuckin’ thing.’

I could see it all as clear as crystal. I knew that *used* feeling, too.

She stood there like a statue for a full minute, expressionless. I wondered if she was thinking along the same lines as I had.

She was.

A volcano erupting shrieks and tears was suddenly in my arms.

45

Friday the seventeenth of January, 1890

Lizzie has dropped her bundle completely. After her first loud outburst, she went into a black despair, which was more frightening than the weepies. She said very little, she shed few tears. Her eyes seemed to be staring outwards at a blank world, but they weren't looking out at all, they were looking inside. What little she said told me what her eyes were seeing—a worthless heap of rubbish. Her grief wasn't so much at losing Pete—good riddance, thought I, there were plenty more fish in that sea—it was at the realisation that during all that time they had been together, when she had brought him back to life and all, he had thought so little of her. She was just his free whore. No wonder he hadn't minded when she charged others. He'd only take that as a compliment.

I thought the best I could do was to demonstrate how much I treasured her—which, I don't have to tell you, Hermione, was God's truth. I held her, stroked her hair, I talked her to sleep like she was a child, telling her stories about how we had met each other, about what amazing people we had met, about what wonderful adventures we'd had, about what amazing adventures we would still have, she and I.

So imagine how I felt that morning, a week before the Chinese New Year. I was standing beside her bed, watching her anxiously, when she opened her eyes—and *smiled!* She held out her arms for me to help her out of bed.

She kissed me. 'Thank you, Terry.' And that was that.

She wasn't back to her normal self by any means, but at least we were sharing the same world, even if she was still standing in its shadows.

Sunday the Nineteenth of January, 1890

Bertie Taylor decided he and his white mates would invade the Chinese New Year celebrations! No, don't worry Hermione, he'd talked it over with the Chinese elders first. They'd formed a committee, comprising the admirable Master Mou, Old WS standing in for Simon Ah Fai who was away seeing Mr. Lee in Melbourne, and our

friend Charlie. The whites comprised Bertie, Magistrate Walters and the amiable drunk, Fred Allingham.

The committee agreed to use the Thomas Plains football ground for a three day All Nations Carnival. The Chinese would kick off the ceremonies with a Lion Dance and fireworks on the first night as usual, but the following days would be an All Nations Sports Carnival with events and competitions between the Europeans and the Chinese, a greased pig competition to be a major feature on the third and final day. Albert Taylor Esquire was the master of ceremonies, umpire in chief, and donor of a couple of hogsheads of fine ales. Magistrate Walters urged the local farmers to do their civic duty by donating the pigs.

I was looking forward to this, it sounded like fun. I also thought it might help take Lizzie's mind off Pete's stinking, rotten behaviour.

46

Tuesday the Twenty-first of January, 1890:- The First Day of Chinese New Year.

The Chinese miners had put aside a little each week throughout the year for the Chinese New Year fireworks. Ah Chee imported large quantities of fireworks from China at a handsome discount, he assured everyone. But knowing Old WS, I'll wager he'd made a pretty penny himself on the transaction. The men worked for a couple of days erecting a tall structure of logs, on which they mounted the fireworks in a clever pattern. On either side of the pile were two smaller structures adorned with gaudy Chinese lanterns and the *prettiest* dolls and gewgaws.

As soon as dusk fell, Jack explained, they with due ceremony would ignite the sparklers at the bottom, which in turn would ignite the catherine wheels, which in turn would ignite the long strings that drooped all over with hundreds of crackers sticking out like bloody big red candles—which in turn, yes finally, would ignite the rockets at the top. They were the *summum bonum*, whatever that meant, top of the heap I suppose, because that's where they were, right at the top. When their wicks caught, *whoosh*, the rockets would zoom off into the night sky, exploding in great balls showering sparkles and burning paper all over the district.

That was the idea.

Ah Chee and Bertie together were the 'All Nations' appointed to set the whole thing off, but as they approached with suitably impressive looking fiery torches, a couple of mischievous white lads, with handkerchiefs tied round their mouths bushranger-style, ran in front of them and tossed their own lit torches halfway up the stack. The cheeky buggers were then off faster than the fireworks themselves. It might have been funny, except that it spoilt the effect the Chinese had so carefully designed: a gradual working up the structure to climax with the rockets. The rockets went off too bleeding soon; the crackers near the bottom were still spinning and banging away while the rockets were emptying themselves to the skies above.

Lizzie, Jack, Charlie and I were standing ten yards or so from the still mightily impressive conflagration, when I felt a touch on my arm.

‘Tleesa!’ May was smiling up at me eagerly.

‘May, how lovely to see you! *Lei ho ma?*’ I truly was delighted to see her. Was this the first time she’d left the house since coming here?

‘Tleesa, look!’ Naughty May covered her mouth with one hand, and giggling fit to bust, pointed to her husband with the other. Ah Chee’s face was a picture: an enraged wombat he. He was running to and fro, shaking his fist and shouting Chinese curses after the youths—who, needless to say, were nowhere to be seen. Bertie for his part was taking the prank in much better spirit. He was smiling ruefully, shrugging, lifting a drinker’s arm to his mouth, miming the instruction: ‘Now let’s all have a drink!’ A man of style is our Bertie.

I introduced May to Jack and Charlie. They were having a good old chinwag, May so vivacious, no doubt thrilled to pieces to be meeting and talking with her own people at last, when Old WS stormed up. I could see he was going to drag May away in his sulk, so I turned on the charm.

‘How *lovely* to see you again, Mr. Ah Chee! *Lei ho ma?* See, May is also teaching me Chinese! Congratulations on this *splendid* display. Such a terrible shame about the fireworks, but look, it is so beautiful still,’ I pointed skywards, touching his arm. ‘Now, have you met Jack Yang and Charlie Lam? Yes, of course you must have ... How nice to see May out enjoying herself. Her English now is really quite fluent ...’ gush gush, burble burble.

The old grump was forced to smile and join in the conversation. I found May’s hand in the dark and squeezed it. She held my hand hard and drew me to her to whisper in my ear. I bent down to listen, nice and confidential like.

‘Tleesa, *yigar yamdouh duk la!* Jig-a-jig nicey! Thank you.’ She flashed me such a grateful smile.

I was so happy for her. And what a demonstration of my medical skills—jig-a-jig *nicey* with that ugly old lump! I threw my arms around her and kissed her on both cheeks. I loved this sweet girl, as I don’t need to tell you, I’m sure. But I wasn’t so happy that somebody, Old WS himself no doubt, had been corrupting my pure English with pidgin. ‘Jig-a-jig’ indeed!

But we couldn't continue to exchange secrets of the marriage bed because other dignitaries, of various shades of white and yellow, descended on Old WS and off he and May went to engage in *important* discussions.

Soon after, Jack's mates joined the group to urge us to hop into Bertie's free beer. I recognised one of them. God help me, he'd been a customer! Jimmy his name was, if I wasn't mistaken. This had to happen, of course it did. When I'd thought about this situation arising, as inevitably it would, I didn't think it would matter, not like it would have mattered in Hobart with those precious public school boys. None of these Chinamen had been to Hutchins School, so they had yet to learn the difference between those you fuck and those you marry. But now, with Jack here, who hadn't been a customer and wasn't likely to be, it did matter. It mattered very much indeed. This was *not* how I wanted Jack to find out about me. And how *unfair*, now I was on the straight and narrow! I was stricken with shame: shame at what Jack would think of me, his teacher; shame at what I had been doing. I experienced something of the self-torture that Lizzie had been experiencing over the past few weeks. And on top of all that was the knowledge that, as Master Mou had so presciently observed, I was about to lose the one thing I had come to Emu Flat to seek: my life partner.

Jack started introducing me when Jimmy interrupted. 'We have met already,' he said, smirking at me. 'How's business?'

'Oh,' Jack turned to Jimmy before I could answer and the game was up, 'why do you take lessons from Miss Teresa? Your English is so good already.'

Jimmy looked at him with amused astonishment, then at me, his eyebrows raised.

I burst in. 'Yes, Jimmy, your *pronunciation*. Yours is very good, but we need to add the polishing touch, eh Jimmy, if you want to speak like an Australian!'

I pulled faces at him in the gloom. *Don't let on!*

He understood, but added his stroke. 'True enough, Jack, but my Australian's not good enough yet. Miss Teresa knows how to polish a man's, er, accent so very well. She's amazing.'

God strike me dead. How ever could I have thought I could catch a decent man, the sort of man I would love until the day I died, doing what I had been doing? And here was that man himself: Jack. How many times in the future would Jack and I run into people who'd been my customers? I cringed at the thought.

I had been extremely lucky this time—not many would be as quick or as sensitive as Jimmy.

47

Thursday, the Twenty-third of January, 1890:- The Third Day of Chinese New Year. Jack considered himself something of a runner. He entered the quarter mile and ran handsomely, smooth and fast as a gazelle. Not that I have ever seen a gazelle running but that's what they say, is it not? Anyhow, Jack presented a fine sight. As he approached the finishing line, however, a European hurtling along like a threshing machine, and nothing at all like a gazelle (as if I would know), pipped him at the post. The Chinese team also lost the cricket match badly, but what else would you expect of Chinamen playing cricket? The Chinese showed their mettle in the fighting contest and evened the score. The Europeans tried to box, prancing back and forth, up and down, their fists held up to their faces. Their Chinese opponents accounted for them in seconds. 'EEYAA!' they screamed, and *kick thud*, the next thing my white brothers knew was that they were on the ground, lengthwise.

At noon, they paraded the greasy pigs. Jack and Charlie had explained to Lizzie and I that this was where our two nations shook hands. The Europeans supplied the pigs, the Chinese cooked them in their pig ovens, and then we all had a jolly good feast together in the evening. The pig ovens were large holes in the ground, lined with stone and sealed with mud. A large fire was lit within, and left to burn itself out. Thereupon, the embers were removed, leaving a hot enclosure in which the pig, seasoned and dressed, was placed for two or three hours. They assured us that the result, *siu jiu* they called it, would be the most delicious roast pork we would ever eat.

The preparation of the pigs, however, was less delicious. The poor animals, covered in greasy fat to make them difficult to grasp, were taken to an enclosure. Bertie, wielding a large cleaver, chopped an inch or so off their tails. The squealing animals, demented with pain, raced off across the enclosure. The game was to catch them. The lads piled into the enclosure, attempting the seemingly impossible task of grasping the pigs as they ran squealing hither and thither.

As we watched this sordid spectacle, Lizzie suddenly gasped and clutched my hand. Pete had jumped into the enclosure! His legs were evidently well healed. He hurled himself upon an animal, but he did not attempt to grasp it round the body with his arms, as the others were doing without success. No, our Pete dived upon the bleeding stump of a tail and with his teeth secured the poor pig, his arms holding tight to its back legs.

His was the first pig for the ovens.

The crowd cheered Pete, while Lizzie bent her face onto my shoulder.

‘To think I loved ’im!’ she moaned. ‘Terry, just you make sure I don’t eat no pig with that bugger’s tooth-prints on its arse.’

In the afternoon Pete swaggered around with a small dark haired girl on his arm. It turned out his tart was Louisa Price, the lass who had attempted to set up business in Bertie’s hotel. She was now one of Fred Allingham’s trollops. Very convenient, wouldn’t you say, that Pete too now worked for Fred Allingham? The two wandered in our direction, unaware of our presence. Suddenly Pete looked up and saw Lizzie. He stopped dead, then abruptly steered Louisa away.

‘Oh, no you don’t, you fuckin’ schemer,’ Liz breathed, ‘come on, Terry.’

‘Lizzie, no! Don’t create a scene. It won’t do no good!’ I was talking to a tree.

‘Hello Pete,’ she called. ‘Congratulations! I’m so glad to see you so fit and well after all me nursin’.’

The two stopped and stared at her. Louisa was looking amused, Pete red and embarrassed.

‘And who’s this, Pete, your new nurse?’ Lizzie pressed on.

‘Nurse, is it? Oh no, not I! There’s funny. No, I’m Louisa. You must be Lizzie then, is it? I’ve heard a lot about you. Pete is ever so grateful ...’

‘I’m glad to hear that ’cause he never told me so ’imself.’ Lizzie stared at Louisa, a hard-bitten little thing with a small round face that was nevertheless quite pretty. I feared the volatile Lizzie was about to create a loud scene that she—and I—might later regret. Please God, don’t let her, not here in full view! The Lord heard my prayer.

Lizzie stepped forward but instead of slapping Louisa, or grabbing her by her long, black, eminently grabbable hair, as I had feared, she said loud enough for all to hear, ‘I hope he’ll be more honest with you than he was with me, that’s all.’

Dignified yet damaging.

Pete seized Louisa by the arm and pulled her away, his face flaming.

A pleasing little scenario.

When it was time for the banquet, we waited until the first pig—Pete’s kill—was despatched, before lining up for ours. I’d never eaten roast pork like this! Jack and Charlie were right; it was just *so* delicious. The skin was crisp, covered in a dark reddish-brown crust that gave it a penetrating spicy flavour, reminding me of the aroma in May’s house. The meat was so juicy and tender it dropped off the bone. I’d have loved to have had more, but there were too many people and not enough pigs.

We were still licking our fingers when another of my ex-customers saw us. He stopped, smiled in an unpleasant way and sauntered over to us. It was one of my mistakes, the swaggering Ah Kit, a braggart and a would-be bully in the bedroom and no doubt outside it. I had let him know in definitive terms that he would not be welcome should ever he contemplate a return visit. Lizzie had warned me that that was not a wise thing to do. It now seemed, judging from the spiteful look on his face, that he was about to exact a fearful revenge. Little did he know how fearful it would be.

Ah Kit asked Jack a question in Cantonese, while looking at me with something like contempt. I could understand the gist of what he was saying. That same horrible feeling of shame I had endured during our encounter with Jimmy returned, this time tenfold. No bluffing this time. My stomach felt like it had been punched, a blush roared up my face, singeing my ears.

‘Ah Jack, you’ve been with her all day! How much does she charge for that, ah?’

Jack looked angry at Ah Kit’s scornful tone of voice. ‘Charge? Why should she charge?’

‘Chickens usually do,’ Ah Kit laughed.

Chickens? Did I understand him correctly? What a surprising term to use when referring to me. Even more surprising was Jack's reaction.

Jack slammed his fist, a beautiful right jab, into Ah Kit's face. Smack on the end of his nose. Ah Kit dropped like a dead branch off a tree, ending up on the ground flat on his back. Jack pulled him up with one hand. He held the stunned Ah Kit, his nose bleeding like one of the recently slaughtered pigs, inches from his own face. Jack hissed something at him that I did not understand. He then threw him away like a sack of rubbish.

'*Jack!* What was the meaning of that?' I knew well enough, but I had to say something. What other question might I have posed?

Spluttering with anger, he said, in English, 'He call you a very bad name, Miss Teresa!'

'Chicken? How can "chicken" be a bad name?'

Now it was Jack's turn to be embarrassed. Yet again! He looked away, muttering, head down, 'Chicken, *gai* in Cantonese, also mean bad woman, do bad things with men. Pah! I never like that Ah Kit. He think it his way of making joke, but no more.' But this time he smiled at me, so softly I nearly kissed him again but thought better of it, given last time. 'He dare not make that joke again. No one dare!'

Jack Yang, what a man you are! You have publicly thrashed a man who insulted me! You are the man I came here to seek, of that I am now certain.

I was also certain that—miraculously—he had had no idea that Ah Kit was correct. I was a chicken. No, I *had been* a chicken. I would be one no longer.

He suggested it was time to take me home. As we walked, I looked into his face. He smiled down at me with such sweetness it hurt my throat. I took his hand and swung our arms the way lovers do—and he promptly withdrew his hand from mine!

This man, who I had travelled so far to find, what was he? He was a leader of men, a fighter, a sportsman and a murderer. But he clearly did not want to be my lover! He obviously thought highly enough of me to get into a public fight about my honour, yet so little of me that he physically shrank from the touch of my hand, let alone my lips. Why was he so afraid of any form of physical intimacy?

This man had made, and then in one gesture had ruined, my Chinese New Year.

48

Jack awoke to a throbbing head, the vomitous taste of stale beer coating his mouth, and to feelings so complex he longed for oblivion again.

The previous night, Charlie had joined Jack and his drinking friends to celebrate the end of the Chinese New Year at the All Nations. It had been a curious night that had disturbed Jack very much. The New Year festivities had been the main topic of conversation—especially the fight between Jack and Ah Kit. Ah Kit was unpopular amongst the other miners, he was an arrogant and loud-mouthed braggart, who all agreed had deserved what he had got. But the fight had led to much public speculation as to what was going on between Jack and that pretty young *gai*. Of Jack's small group of friends, Guy had seen Miss Teresa in a bout of homesickness that involved cuddling and head stroking, but only Jimmy had actually had sexual relations with her. Jack knew that his friends, indeed all the miners, knew about Terry's role in the Wu Ying saga. They admired her for her courage and they also liked what they knew of her, but not because she was a *gai*. They didn't make moral judgements about her, or about Lizzie, her earthier friend.

Of course Jack knew that Miss Teresa was a *gai*. How could he not in a camp of miners whose conversation often dwelt on such things? He also knew that Jimmy had been a customer of hers. But that didn't make him happy about it, nor did it mean he wanted it brought into the general conversation, so he was pleased when Miss Teresa had deflected Jimmy's question so adroitly. *Gai* she may have been, but beyond that Jack saw Miss Teresa as his English teacher and as a sterling companion. Like the other men, Jack was not a moralist; his sexual innocence was not the result of a ferocious conscience but of a traumatic incident he avoided thinking about except when ambushed by his nightmares.

Intimacy with a woman was something that Jack desperately wanted but that he couldn't help but reject. His initial reaction to Miss Teresa's touch—her lips, her arms, even her hand—was more than a young man's shyness. It was a deep embarrassment that caused him immediately to withdraw. Jack resented the fact that

Jimmy had slept with this woman, who had been his companion and friend in such wild adventures, when he could not.

Groaning, Jack arose from his bed. He walked to the fireplace, revived the embers, and prepared some strong tea. He looked out the window to a beautiful morning.

‘No work today, Charlie. Let’s go for a long walk, I need to clear my head. But let’s not talk about yesterday, if you don’t mind.’

They headed towards Moorina along Frome Road. Jack had learned to love the smell of the bush. It made him feel Australian, Chinese no longer, to smell that mixture of eucalyptus, damp earthiness, and the penetrating loveliness of boronia when you rubbed the leaves between finger and thumb. He could now name the most common trees and many of the birds that squittered and squawked and shrieked above their heads.

Topping a rise not far from camp, they espied a strange spectacle. Coming towards them was a man bearing what seemed to be a cross.

‘Is this some sort of Christian ritual, Charlie? Have you ever seen that before?’

‘No, Jack ... *Hey*, it’s poor old Bing! What on earth ...?’

Blind Bing was bending under the weight, not of a cross, but of a man. The man had outstretched arms. Bing had linked his own arms under the armpits of his curious burden.

‘That must be Henry on his back,’ Jack exclaimed.

They ran towards him, Jack calling: ‘Bing, Bing! It’s Jack and Charlie. Stop!’

Bing lowered poor stiff Henry so that his feet touched the ground. Bing straightened up with a groan.

‘So glad you are here, my friends. Henry is most unwell. I am bearing him to seek a doctor.’

Jack took one look at Henry and sighed, taking Bing by the arm. ‘Bing, my friend, Henry is more than unwell. I am so sorry, but he is dead.’ As Jack spoke, the

smell of flyblown meat confirmed in a sickening wave what *rigor mortis* had already told them.

‘No, Henry’s not *dead!* We were talking just a moment ago. He cannot be dead! Will you help me take him to the doctor? I am utterly spent.’

‘Why not use your horse, you are in no condition to carry him all that distance,’ Charlie said gently.

‘Horse? I have no horse. I don’t know what you are talking about ...’ Bing quavered, looking completely lost.

Charlie and Jack looked at each other with the same question. Would they insist on the truth, or would they agree with the poor fellow in his sad delusion?

Jack put voice to their answer. ‘Very well, dear friend. We’ll fashion a stretcher and carry Henry to Thomas Plains. You need a rest.’

‘Thomas Plains? No, we are in Moorina, surely.’

There was no point in arguing. ‘To the nearest doctor then.’

They did as they had for Pete, making a stretcher out of two saplings and their coats. Reverently, they laid Henry upon it.

‘What will we do when we get to Thomas Plains?’ Jack whispered to Charlie.

‘Have Henry’s death certified, I imagine.’

‘Who by?’

‘Magistrate Walters, I suppose. I’ve no idea. Mr. Taylor will know. Then we’ll have to give Henry a decent burial.’

Jack led, Charlie in the rear, Bing’s hand resting on Charlie’s shoulder for guidance. They walked their grisly way through Emu Flat back to Thomas Plains. The prevailing smell now was not of the clean bush but of decaying humanity. Even the birds kept their distance and were silent.

As they neared Emu Flat, Bing began a high-pitched keening, soft but penetrating, that continued without cease. Whether he breathed in or out the passage of air in his constricted throat created the sound of unreachable desolation. At last, Bing seemed to have realised the truth of the matter.

Finally, they arrived at Thomas Plains.

‘Charlie, you stay with Bing here. I’ll go to the hotel to obtain advice from Mr. Taylor.’

The smell of death seemed to hang around Jack as he entered the hotel. Mr. Taylor was as usual behind the bar. Jack started to explain when Bertie interrupted.

‘Fuck! You mean you’ve got a stiff ’un out there?’ he yelled. ‘I didn’t think ya mate drank that much last night.’

‘No, not Charlie. It is Henry, a market gardener from Moorina. What we do with the body, Mr. Taylor?’

‘Well, you don’t bring it in *here*, for a start. You’ll have to have it certified dead, which will present little problem from the sound of things. Fred’s a JP, he can do that in the circs. Then you should go to the Joss House. Master Mou can arrange the right sort of funeral.’

‘Hey, Fred,’ he turned to the bibulous Mr. Allingham who was sitting on a bar stool, smiling at the world in general, ‘Job for you. Official.’

Bing spent the next morning leaning against the back of the house, maintaining that infernal keening. Last night, Jack and Charlie had to chew wads of paper and stuff them in his ears so they could sleep. Bing, poor fellow, had eaten a few grains of rice for supper and nothing for breakfast. Another funeral was surely imminent.

There were few at the graveside. If they’d held the funeral at Moorina no doubt it would have been crowded with Henry’s many customers, but Jack reasoned that the corpse must already be several days old and in any case Bing was in no state to cope with a large affair. The decision to get it over quickly was a judgement with which Charlie heartily concurred. Master Mou, dressed in his white robes, conducted the simple ceremony, his aura of sadness befitting the occasion. They burned some paper money, Bing’s keening providing the funeral music. Terry and Lizzie tried without success to sniff back tears. Jack surreptitiously searched Terry’s face, so transparently working with grief, and was touched that she was so moved by Henry’s death although she had met him only the once, at the beginning of that dangerous search for Wu Ying. Or perhaps she, like him, was more moved at the piteous state

in which Bing was now plunged, than at grief for Henry. He fervently wished they might console each other but was at a loss to imagine how.

After the funeral, Jack and Charlie sought advice from Master Mou. They explained that Henry and Bing's market garden was of some value but Bing was in no position to do anything about it. They'd already tried to discuss this with Bing, but he had made little sense, except to let them know he had no wish to return to their garden in Moorina ever again. As to any relatives he or Henry might have had in China or in Australia, Master Mou advised: 'I suggest you visit Moorina while Ah Bing is still alive to discuss his and Henry's affairs with Mr. Cheung Goon. He looks after the Chinese community there.'

Jack and Charlie left poor Bing to entertain the birds outside their house, while they repaired as fast as they were able to Moorina. Mr. Cheung Goon told them that Bing and Henry had arrived in the district many years ago, before his time, and there was nothing in the records about either of them.

His advice was simple. 'Sell the market garden on Bing's behalf and either give him the money, or perhaps administer it for him on his behalf. As his friends, I shall authorise power of attorney to that effect if you so choose. He may well need medical treatment, apart from the expenses of living. Good luck to you, and thank you for your concern. Ah yes, and a generous donation to the Moorina Chinese Community Fund would be appropriate. I am happy to receive that from you, on behalf of the Fund.'

So that is what they did. It took only a couple of weeks to sell the place, speed being more important than price. An ex-tin miner purchased the property for £240, to his obvious satisfaction and to the great relief of the two friends. The horse was in reasonable condition, given that it had been neglected for God knows how long, so they loaded the cart with Bing and Henry's personal possessions that were of any value, including a goodly supply of *mai jau*, and returned to Emu Flat. The *jau* at least gave Bing some temporary cheer. And as miners having little need for a horse and cart, and no inclination to look after it, they sold it in Thomas Plains.

A fallen tree lay at the back of their hut. Bing liked crawling along the trunk and lying on it prone. He embraced it with his arms, his cheek resting on the smooth bark as he crooned: 'Henry, *joy chan oi dik*. Dearest Henry. Henry, *joy chan oi dik*.'

Jack and Charlie returned from work a few days later to find Bing lying beside the fallen tree.

He had rejoined his friend.

49

Tuesday the Fourth of February, 1890

Despite Lizzie's fine performance at the All Nations Carnival, she is up and down like a jack-in-the-box. She takes to wandering. Today she arose late, dressed, and without a word was out the door. She returned in time for the evening meal, drunk.

'Lizzie, where have you been?'

'Visitin'.'

'Who?'

'Just someone.'

'Oh Lizzie, Lizzie ...' Prying would do more harm than good with her in this mood, I thought. But not Pete, surely to God! Saying nothing, I hugged her, holding her close.

She stood rigidly in my arms, breathing fumes of a strong spirit into my face.

'Ya done yet?'

I released her from my embrace and moved to the fireplace to retrieve and serve the beef stew and potatoes.

'Daisy,' she said after a long silence.

'Oh, how's Daisy then?'

'As full as a fart. Like me. Whadda ya reckon?'

Sermons leapt to my lips. What a tragedy if Liz ended up like Daisy! And all because of that worthless Pete. That and her rotten family life, which certainly hadn't helped her deal with Pete's selfish rejection.

I pushed the sermons back down my throat.

Thursday the Thirteenth of February, 1890

I had just completed my morning shopping. It was a hot day and my poor old feet were feeling it. I was walking down Anchor Street, dreading the long haul home, when I became aware of a horse and cart rumbling beside me.

'Terry!'

I looked up to see Our Hero, Pete no less, looking down at me uneasily.
'Hey, Terry, can I talk to you? I'll give you a ride back to Emu Flat if you like.'

'Thanks, Pete. Yes, I'd appreciate that.' The ride would be a welcome relief. I was not so sure about the talk, but thought it might do some good as far as Lizzie was concerned.

Pete leaned over holding his hand out for me to grasp. I took it, and with my other hand holding my skirts high, I swung aboard beside him.

'Ups-a-daisy! Doing that a dozen times a day would keep you in fit and proper working order, wouldn't it just.' My bum hit the rock hard plank seat. Well, I thought, either me bum or me feet are going to suffer, and the old dogs needed a rest.

He forced a smile. ' 'Spose so.'

Pete flicked the reins and we lurched ahead. *Ouch*. I steadied myself, grasping the rail across the front. He stared at the road for a couple of minutes saying nothing. I was not going to help him into whatever it was he wanted to say.

'Liz hurt me, you know, at the Carnival. Cut to the quick I was.' He suddenly burst out.

'Maybe she was even more hurt by what you did, or rather did *not* do.'

He turned to face me, bewilderment written all over his mug. 'But what else could I do?'

'You could have had the guts to tell her it was over and why. That's the least you could've done. Specially after what she's done for you, nursing you back to health and all.'

'That's different. She was like me mate, and mates help mates. Any mate woulda done that.'

'She wasn't *any* mate. You were lovers, for heaven's sake! She was in *love* with you and you made her believe you were in love with her.'

'Yeah, well, having her as me jam-tart is one thing. You know, like Louisa, and plenty of other sheilas. But this was getting serious!'

'Exactly.'

'Mum was worried. She guessed what went on.'

'Clever Mummy.'

‘Don’t be like that, Terry. Look, I put it to you fair and square. Me mum and dad don’t mind me going out and having a bit of fun, even going to the knock-shop now and again. It’s what any healthy young man does, that’s what my dad reckons. But Jesus, Terry, you can’t *marry* a girl like that!’

‘A girl like me, you mean?’

‘Shit, Terry, ya don’t make it easy for a man, do ya?’ He took a deep breath. ‘Look, no offence to you, you don’t seem like no second-hand Sue you don’t, but me mum and dad were fair dinkum. “Son,” Dad said, his finger pointing straight at me, “you’re gettin’ too serious with that trollop from Emu Flat. We know what she is, and we’re not havin’ a whore as a daughter-in-law. Ya hear me, do ya? She’s not to come to this ’ouse again. You’re finished with the likes of her, and you better tell her so, quick smart”.’

‘Then why didn’t you?’ I was debating with myself whether to tell Pete just to drop me where we were and I’d walk home. Trouble was, I didn’t feel like walking home. My bum could take more punishment yet, even if my ears had had more than their fair share.

Instead of replying, he dropped his head and belched a sob. Then he tipped his head back and out came this raucous, racking sound like his chest was being dragged out through his throat. In my line of business, men often visit simply to open their hearts out to someone. Sometimes they’re just sookies who want to display their fine feelings—you know, my wife doesn’t understand me, type of thing—but this boy threw a six in the ‘Poor Me’ game. I even started to feel sorry for him. He was not a happy boy, but I was glad for Lizzie. She would be completely *wasted* on a sook like this.

Pete stopped making an ass of himself as suddenly as he had started. ‘Sorry. Don’t usually blub like that. ’Spose it’s because I really do like Lizzie and I didn’t want to hurt her feelin’s and all.’

I had to say this much, although I’d be dead sorry if he took me up on it. ‘Well, why don’t you see if she’s still interested in you? If she is, you could leave home. Bugger your dad, it’s your life, not his.’

We were ascending the hill just outside Emu Flat.

‘Couldn’t do that, Terry. Dad’d disinherit me, but that’s not the half of it. Fact is, I couldn’t marry a whore, Terry. It’s not what *I* think, course it ain’t. It’d be our kids. Just imagine what the kids would think if ever they found out about their mum!’

‘Stop the cart, Pete. This is where I get off.’

He turned to me in surprise, but obediently hauled on the reins. ‘Whoa!’

I fished for my exit line. It wasn’t a good one, I was that enraged.

‘No, that’s not the reason, you poor, pathetic fool. Fact is, that *whore* is far too good for you. She’s honest and full of love and good feelings. But *you* ... you’re more worthless than the dirt under the nail of her little finger. You’re ... You’re ...’
Oh, what’s the use?

I strode off down the road with never a backward glance.

Wednesday the Nineteenth of February, 1890

I decided not to tell Lizzie about that encounter with Pete, although it made me feel more optimistic. It had to be a good sign, didn’t it, that Lizzie was spared from marriage to a selfish creature like that? He may be an immature little sookie-calf at present, but I could see him ending up a drunken bully just like his own father—just like Lizzie’s own father. Maybe Someone *was* looking after her after all, protecting her from repeating the sad story of her mother.

Unfortunately, that Someone was being a little negligent of Her charge. Lizzie was down in the dumps again today. Yesterday afternoon she wandered off, and I could only imagine it was to have more wet chats with Daisy, which she’d been having a lot more of recently, a real lot. But she had said nought and I had no mind to intrude.

By midnight, she still had not returned. Sitting by the barely smouldering fire, the lantern low, intending to write in my journal, but I couldn’t stop thinking thoughts darker than the black hole leading into my cold bedroom. With my imagination running wild, I was on the point of going to Jack and Charlie’s hut to organise a search party, when the door burst open.

‘Not in bed yet?’ She looked dishevelled, her dress more rumpled than usual, no bonnet, her hair awry. One blessing was that she did not appear to be drunk.

‘I was worried, Lizzie, you going off like that. I didn’t know where you were, I didn’t know what might have befallen you ...’

‘Pray do not worry about me,’ she mocked in a highfalutin’ accent. ‘One can look after one’s own fuckin’ self. One even remembered the fuckin’ lemons. Look.’ She put her hand in her pocket and hauled out a few notes and coins. ‘Let’s see ’ow much I made tonight. Two huts I did, Wheel of Fortune miners, on the far side of camp. Five in one, seven in the other.’ She sorted and counted. ‘Two pounds and fifteen shillings. Bugger, some bastard didn’t pay me, did he? Still, not bad for one night’s work. Any ’ot water in the kettle? I better clean meself up. Put some more wood on, will ya? It’s bloody cold in ’ere.’

She placed the washbasin on the floor and poured in some water. She tested the temperature, stripped and stood in it, her body lit by the now brightly blazing fire. She soaped her body and sponged herself, massaging up a fine lather in the region that had so recently been bearing the brunt of her toils.

‘Ah, that’s good. You should join me, Terry. I bin drummin’ up custom. Sittin’ here waitin’ for takers has whiskers on it. Anyhow, your callers now only want to be taught English. Not much cabbage in that.’

Lizzie was partially correct. One reason why we came here was the cabbage. But the more important reason was to find ourselves men to marry. She thought she’d found hers but then she lost him for a similar reason as I fear that I shall lose Jack. What she did tonight raised the stark contrast between what we were doing—what I *had* been doing, rather—and what we really wanted as the fruit of our labour.

I had noticed that since Jack felled that awful Ah Kit, I’d been treated with much more respect by the miners. Now when I walk through the camp or along the road they smile, many clasp their hands in front of them and drop their heads. They did *not* do that before. They obviously respect Jack as a man of strength and honour. Jack had told me how he and Charlie had stood up for the men against the self-important Simon Ah Fai and won some concessions for them (if only they knew what I knew about this same Simon Ah Fai). The other miners must have been

thinking that this Miss Teresa must be very special if their Jack would stand up for her so publicly. So they pay me respect out of respect for him. But, Hermione, you spy the catch there, do you not? I must appear to be *worthy* of him.

Imagine if I did as Lizzie did tonight; if I knocked on the doors of the huts of these same men crying: ‘Evenin’ all! Five bob a fuck, any takers?’ It would be the certain end of any hope of marrying Jack! But what if his friend’s *friend* behaved like that? What might that lead to?

I hadn’t received a customer since well before Chinese New Year and will not in future. But it’s not what I am going to do—or not do—that worries me. It’s not only what I had done, it’s what Lizzie is still doing. She could be a little more *discreet* in soliciting for business – luckily her aggressive business tactics were with Wheel of Fortune miners – but word *does* get around so, Hermione.

I turned to naked Lizzie, standing in the washbasin, soapsuds falling from her splendid breasts in wavy lines, regathering beneath her stomach like a modesty garment.

‘Lizzie darling, you and I have some thinking to do.’

50

Monday the Twenty-fourth of February, 1890

The hound will *not* call me ‘Terry’, always this ‘Miss Teresa’. I asked him, not once but many times, to drop the formality: ‘Call me Terry!’ I demanded of him. Do you know what he said, Hermione? No, of course you don’t. Well I’ll tell you what he said. Each time, said he, ‘You are my teacher, I must show you respect.’ Lor’-luv-a-duck, who wants *respect*? Well, I do, come to think of it, but more than that I want his *love*! The way he attacked Ah Kit suggested that Jack just *might* love me in the way I crave, the way I am now sure I love him. But if you do love me, dear Jack, just a little bit, a morsel even, do *not* call me ‘Miss Teresa’! Do *not*. And hold my *hand* when I ask you to!

The fight also confirmed that Jack could have had no idea as to my past. How innocent can a man be? No, worse still. He must be a *prude*! Just look at his embarrassment over translating ‘*gai*’ for me! So how could a man like him ever accept, let alone love, a one-time working girl like me? I would have thought that most of the Chinamen would know full well what I had been doing for a living—apart from teaching that is, which I’m a dab hand at too—but maybe they don’t brag about the details of their fornication the way white men do.

Many a man falls in love with and marries his harlot, but as good and straight—and as *prudish*!—a man as Jack surely would not. I can only hold the forlorn hope that he will grow to love me before he finds out, and that when he does, he will love me enough to accept me for what I *am*, not reject me for what I once *was*. Forlorn? The very word is like a bell that tolls the death of a love as yet unborn. My forlorn hope, a chime so distant it is nigh beyond my hearing, is that he may yet love me. (Poetry was my favourite school subject, in case you were wondering, Hermione. Wonder no more.)

I *must* know what he thinks of me. Does he share my feelings? How could I find *that* out? Surely, if he’s the man he appears to be, he like all healthy men, *prude* or no, must needs seek *release*. Could I lead him into desiring me so much that he

declared his passion? The difficult part would be to bring him to that point, without *shocking* my darling prude.

Lying abed this morning, I thought about his next English lesson. I compared his progress with that of May's. Suddenly it struck me what that lesson might fruitfully be.

The Human Body, Part 2!

He knew face, hand, leg, &c. Good. I would focus first on the innocuous, and then gently, ever so gently, approach increasingly more intimate parts. Then, thought I, roaring with lust, my Jack would lurch into my waiting, soft arms.

We would float upwards to meet the immortals; our joyous shouts would make the heavens positively *ring* as he voided his essence into my heaving, panting, *eager* body!

So thought I.

Wednesday the Twenty-sixth of February, 1890

Revision was the thin end of my wedge. We revisited face, nose, eyebrows, all of which he spoke and wrote, as quick as a whippet. I loosened my collar and allowed some nice white shoulder to go on show. Here was a new word.

'Shoulder,' I said.

'Shoulder,' he repeated. '*Boktau*,' he added for my benefit.

'S-H-O-U-L-D-E-R,' I spelt and sounded out while he carefully wrote the letters down. He knew his letters now so he had no need for my chart. Now for the other shoulder. How was he taking this? I looked carefully and decided that *uneasy* might be the word to use. But faint heart never won fair, innocent young lad, Terry old girl, I assured myself. I put my thumbs in the top of my dress and slowly eased it down, a little at first. Very little.

'Collar bones. C-O-L-L-A-R B-O-N-E-S.'

'Collar bones. *Sor gwut*.'

An inch or two more then. First, the left one. I looked for any signs of excitement. The pupils of his eyes were dilating but there was no visible dilation,

alas, where it mattered most. Before even half of my snowy white breast was visible, it was all too apparent I had made a grievous miscalculation.

He turned his head away, a hand covering his eyes. ‘No, Miss Teresa. Please, *no!*’

I snapped my dress back up to where good girls kept it. How softly must I tread to catch this monkey!

He commenced to stand up, as if to take his exit quick sticks, but I gently pushed him down.

‘Sorry, if that offends you, but of course I wasn’t going to reveal *all!*’—not half I wasn’t—‘it is called a breast, B-R-E-A-S-T. Now write that down.’

He did not provide me with the Chinese.

Skipping what lay betwixt breast and thigh, we worked our lexicological way down the leg: knee cap, calf, ankle bone. Maybe he’s a foot man, I thought. After all, he *is* Chinese. I took my shoe off. Here we go then: instep, big toe, little toe. No reaction.

He was as dead as mutton.

I was totally astonished, not to say disappointed. Here was a man’s man, but quite unlike any other man I’d ever met, acting like my innocent little brother, if I had one. But he was my age and twice as big.

I gave up.

To cover this grievous misjudgement of mine, I engaged him in conversation. I used the high moments of the Wu Ying drama to make it more personal than a formal lesson—and to remind him, as apparently he needed reminding—that we, he and I, had shared some extraordinary experiences. I also wanted to find out if I had been an accomplice in carrying out a *murder*.

‘Jack, tell me, did you use that gun I gave you?’

‘Ah Miss Teresa, I want to ask you too. How you got that gun, ah?’

‘It was Wu Ying’s of course. He dropped it when we hit him.’

‘Ah,’ he relaxed, ‘so pleased. You not a killing woman.’

‘I might be if you’re not a good boy.’ I pointed my finger at him and went ‘*piew*’. We both laughed. ‘But *you* are a killing man, aren’t you? Now, tell me what happened.’

He described how Wu Ying had plummeted to what should have been his certain death, but he had somehow survived. ‘Charlie thought he had demon inside him. He little bit frightened. I not. I special want to kill ...’

‘Why Jack, you’re such a nice man, a *gentle* man. What had Wu Ying done to you?’

Jack’s face clouded. ‘I tell you later maybe ...’

He remained silent for a few moments, then shook his head and resumed his story. ‘His face appear at edge, he pulling himself out of gully. “Wu Ying!” I call. He look straight at me. That is what I want, so he know who kill him. I shoot his face. *Now* he die, no problem. He fall to bottom like sleeping man.’ Jack imitated a sleeping man. Back first, in other words. ‘We climb down, search for money ... er, around waist, er ...’

‘Money belt?’

‘*Haiyaa*, money belt. Tie rope to wrists, take rope to top. We lift him halfway, we drop him, lift him, drop him ...’

‘*Jack!* That was *beastly* of you!’

‘Why ah? It not hurt because he dead already. We need to hide bullet hole, make sure it look like he fall, have accident, no problem. We untie him from rope, bring rope home. Show how we try save him. It is, what you say?’

‘Evidence.’

‘*Haiyaa*, evidence. Ah, now perhaps I go.’ He moved to stand up.

‘No, Jack, before you go, I need some advice.’

‘I would be happy, Miss Teresa.’ He sighed audibly and sat down again.

‘Ever since you stood up for me at Chinese New Year ...’

“‘Stood up for ...’”, he repeated. ‘That not make sense.’

‘Er, supported me, backed me up ... Thumped Ah Kit, then.’

For the first time in this unhappy lesson he looked pleased. ‘Ah,’ he smiled, ‘did you know Ah Kit leave camp?’

I shook my head.

‘*Haiyaa*, he lose too much face. Everyone happy, no-one like him.’

That was good news. Ah Kit spelt trouble. I had fears that he might try to exact some sort of revenge from Jack for humiliating him so. But back to my problem.

‘Jack, I have been asked by many of the men to teach them English. They want to learn to read and write and I would like to teach them. But there are too many to teach one at a time. I could teach them in a class but I have no room here.’ Not to mention the fact that we couldn’t have Lizzie’s customers trooping in and out, I thought. ‘Also, there are some children, about a couple of dozen, including Wheel of Fortune and the other miners, who prefer to miss school rather than walk all the way to the school at Thomas Plains and back again. They should be able to go to school here, near their homes.’

‘I want to start a proper school in Emu Flat, Jack. I would teach English and general subjects and I’m hoping to persuade Lizzie to teach arithmetic. But we’ll need a room. Is there a room in Emu Flat, a meeting hall perhaps, that we could rent for a school?’

‘*Haiyaa*. We miners have a large rooms Mr. Simon Ah Fai build for us. I, er, make him do that.’ Jack smiled then dropped his gaze modestly. ‘It has tables and chairs also. Sek Lung own it but Mr. Simon Ah Fai will agree for you to use as school. I tell him so.’

‘Oh Jack, would you? Then I could have a word with him, after you have prepared the way.’

‘Yes, yes, I talk to Mr. Ah Fai. But now I really must leave, Miss Teresa.’ And out the door he shot.

Had the disaster of this misconceived lesson on body parts been mitigated? No, I concluded. Yes, he had stayed behind and we had chatted, but he was edgy and couldn’t leave quickly enough when he had the chance.

I had been chewing over the idea of the school ever since Chinese New Year. My savings from *Lalla Rookh* were dwindling now that my only income was from teaching the odd miner—and one in particular was being very odd indeed. Not that

money was the only reason I wanted to establish a school. I *liked* teaching. Jack's help in this would be wonderful. Maybe that would bring us closer.

As for the other matters? *Harrumph*. I really wanted to know why Jack hated Wu Ying quite so much but he wouldn't tell me: 'I tell you later maybe.' No, Jack, if you are my friend you shall tell me when I ask you. Especially now I discover I am your accomplice in *murdering* him!

And worst of all—the hound still calls me 'Miss Teresa' and seems likely to continue to do so.

Damn. *Damn*. DAMN.

51

Wednesday the Fifth of March, 1890

Simon Ah Fai was like butter on a summer's day. Normally a hard little bugger, as yielding as a crowbar, he was a lot more pliable when talking to a lady who knew a thing or two about his somewhat *unusual* quirks and predilections—and after talking to a powerful and popular man who had previously interceded on behalf of said lady. He acceded swiftly to my request for the meeting room—and, yes, free of charge of course. The All Nations School, with its distinguished patrons, Mr. Simon Ah Fai and Mr. Albert Taylor Esquire, could proceed.

The local mothers weren't too happy about their children being taught only in English—at first only six turned up, and that was for mornings only. The main use of the school was on Sundays with the miners: I quickly enrolled twenty. A quid a week extra, and that was manna from heaven I can tell you in my more straightened circumstances as of late.

I coached Lizzie in some of the finer points of arithmetic, filling those cracks left by her lack of formal education. Her informal education, wherein she had received many a hard knock, so to speak, led her to appreciate the importance of keeping account of amounts of money. This, coupled with her facility with the abacus and the unaccountable enthusiasm that that instrument instilled in her, led her to keep track of all sorts of quantities. She was beginning to see the world in a *numerical* light. But only beginning. Elementary arithmetic—which she insisted on calling 'ciphering'—she easily mastered, but more advanced notions, such as fractions beyond halves and quarters, and decimals and percentages, were foreign to her. Time enough.

Our little All Nations School may yet acquire an arithmetic teacher.

Two Months Later—to wit: Tuesday the Seventeenth of June, 1890

Yesterday Lizzie and I were sitting at the table brushing up her calculating skills. I thought it would be a suitable time to introduce her to decimals. She had been managing so well teaching our half dozen kiddies with their adding and timesing and

suchlike operations. I was so pleased that she liked the kiddies and they her. She was a natural teacher, and with a bit of filling in and smoothing off she'd be a great colleague—no need for her to be on the game then either.

'Come on,' she said, 'give us a hard one this time.'

'78 times 12,341, divide by 59, and add 531.' I scribbled the numbers down and commenced calculating. I was still into the times when she interrupted.

'Sixteen thousand eight hundred and forty six and a bit more,' she called. 'Won't rightly go, exact.'

'Hang on, let me finish.' Minutes later I produced 16,846.22. 'Right. Your "bit more" is a decimal, point two two.'

'What's a friggin' decimal?'

Oh dear, thought I, that calculation was too hard a one to start with. Back to basics. I glanced around the room for inspiration. Ha, there on the shelf were her boxes of beads—she loved doing beadwork.

'Can I use these?' I asked holding up a box of beads. I thought I'd count them out in lots of ten. Start with nine of one colour in what I'd call the 'units' box, the next lot of ten in a different colour in a 'tens' box, &c. We'd keep track of the counting by using numerals so she would make the connection between her blessed ciphering and the way the number system worked.

She shrugged. 'Thought you was teachin' me them decimals.'

'I am,' I smiled, returning to the table and sitting down. 'Now, these blue beads we call "units".'

'Why units?'

''cause they're the ones.'

'The ones of what?' she asked a trifle crossly.

'Just ones, any old ones. Of whatever it is you are counting,' I added quickly on seeing bafflement creep over her face. 'Now these red beads, we'll call them "tens".'

As I started counting them onto the table she glared at them, then at me, her mouth turned down at the corners. This was going to be more difficult than I had thought it would be. To my relief, I was interrupted by a knock on the door.

There, in the doorway, was sweet little May, dressed in a sober European dress with a high lacy collar and a large picture hat, beneath which was the sweetest smile I ever did see.

‘Hello, Tleesa, how are you? And Rizabet, how are you?’

‘May!’ I threw my arms around her and hugged her tightly. I hadn’t seen my little sister for so long, it seemed. All of a week anyway. And she’d *never* visited our house before. ‘What a *surprise!* Come ... er, *yap lai la!*’ I held the door open for her, nodding to Dave, a basso profundo now, who was sitting on the driving seat of the barouche waiting outside.

‘Tleesa, Rizabet, you come ride with me ah? I tell you something.’ She bent at the waist, her face uplifted towards ours, giggling furiously, her hands over her mouth.

We all trooped outside and climbed aboard. ‘Back Thomas Plain, Dave,’ May called.

Dave flicked the reins, and off we went in fine style. Sitting inside, on the nice padded leather seats, May turned to us. ‘Husband allow me go see you now, he so happy.’ She looked at me slyly.

‘Why now, May?’

‘*Bibi lidou,*’ she patted her tummy. ‘I have baby!’

And I am to be her *midwife!*

When I was next at Allingham’s Store stocking up on our now considerable teaching supplies, I told Hilary of my new station and if she had any books that could help, or any other advice on what a midwife actually *did*.

‘Your stationary materials and the like will present little difficulty, Miss Conway,’ said she. ‘As to the other matter,’ she paused, looking almost warm for the sparely constructed hag that she was, ‘I’ll place an order for *Mrs. Postlethwaite’s Cyclopaedia of Midwifery*, if you so choose. That, I hear, is a reliable treatise. It should arrive in a couple of weeks, if I order from Hobart. But, if I were you, I should also take advice from a local midwife. Winnie McLennan has had lots of

experience in deliverin' bubbsies. Tell her I suggested you pay her a visit. Or Freda Tucker. But try Winnie first, see how you go.'

As I studied Mrs. Postlethwaite's *Cyclopaedia*, I quickly discovered that that worthy lady had some *quaint* ideas about the role we midwives have in easing the passage of human beings into this sorrowful world in mint condition. While she had some helpfully sensible things for me to ponder, other ideas appeared rather less so.

Consider the following, Hermione:

When the abdomen protrudeth in such a manner that Milady's toes may not be seen when she standeth erect with straightened back and eyes downcast, elasticity is the touchstone to be attained until that Happiest of Days! To this end, atop each bedpost affix five well-chosen sprigs of lavender, tied with a blue ribbon if the advent of a boy is closest to her Master's heart, a pink ribbon if a girl be so. Thereafter, three times per week, the particular days matter not, Milady should take a turn around the garden, leaning on your arm if your support eases any discomfort her perambulations may cause her to experience, until her brow is glowing.

So far, so good, but I rather fancied May might well *baulk* at Mrs.

Postlethwaite's further prescriptions:

Lead her to her bed where she may disrobe entirely, there to lie recumbent. Bring to her bedside a pannikin containing a fragrant oil. Olive oil is for texture and nourishment of the skin pre-eminently suitable, but for the pleasure of Milady, add some drops of tincture of rosemary, or of oil of cloves, or of whatever fragrance is most pleasing to Milady's sensitive nostrils. For sensitive they shall be while she is enceinte. Gently massage her skin, in circles proceeding from her Eve's Mark, applying but little pressure with your fingertips, proceeding further as it may please Milady, &c. Be it noted, however, that rather more pressure, applied first with the

palms of your hands, then with the most sensitive application of the pads of your fingers, must needs address Milady's upper thighs, buttocks, and betwixt, for it be precisely those soft, yet must needs be well fortified, areas that shall ultimately be called upon to do the work of a veritable Trojan. Continue nigh unto parturition itself. Under no circumstance should the Master be present while you carry out these quintessentially feminine ministrations.

If Ah Yee had been jealous of my role as English teacher to her charge, she was visibly and increasingly so of my role as midwife. To allay such feelings on her part, I sought long and earnest conversations with her, but it turned out that she knew much less than did I about the miracle of birth. However, she did hold superstitions every bit as quaint as those of Mrs. Postlethwaite. Ah Yee required the immediate re-arrangement of the *furniture* in Milady's and Master's bedroom, according to the ancient dictates of *fung shui*. But how wind and water affected matters, I failed to discern. Nothing daunted, I encouraged Ah Yee in putting these dictates of fierce tradition into practise, which required reorienting the bed, the dressing table and wardrobes just so. I happily agreed with these puzzling instructions, thereby saving substantial amounts of face for the poor lady. Having thus performed her part in guaranteeing the safe delivery of a healthy child, with a sniff and a toss of her head Ah Yee left May and I alone, to my immense relief.

As Milady's toes were invisible even before she was with child, I thought possibly the fourth month would be an opportune time to attempt—with the utmost delicacy—these *feminine* ministrations, her little tummy by that stage beginning to show some sign of becoming a somewhat larger tummy. May received Mrs. Postlethwaite's regimen with some reservation at first, but (to my relief) increasingly with delight. In fact, she suggested that she render me a similar servicing but as I was not with child, I felt it *inappropriate* to accept her kindly offer. Praying that Ah Yee would continue to maintain her distance, and that the Master would not take it upon

himself to pay May an unexpected visit, May and I continued our English lessons within this novel and even *pleasurable* context.

But I do believe I have said *sufficient* of the details of May's progress along the road to parturition.

That Happiest of Days: Monday the Twenty-third of March, 1891

May, despite her tiny body, was in labour but a few hours. What with Beatrice in the kitchen ensuring a plentiful supply of boiling water (far in excess of what was actually needed) and with Ah Yee assisting me in the bedroom, the *elasticity* engendered by Mrs. Postlethwaite's remarkable preparations in combination with May's heroic pushing—the latter by dint of exercises Mrs. Postlethwaite neglected to outline but which I had devised as I became more familiar with what appeared to be happening during this *miraculous* process—our efforts were made flesh. For on this, the twenty-third day of March, 1891, May was delivered of a fine, full-throated young strapper of 5¾ lbs.

While this quintessentially *feminine* business was being conducted in the bedroom, Old WS was in the parlour stamping backwards and forwards, as was his wont when his emotions ran high, an activity embellished on this occasion with the emission of loud snorts from time to time. When I at last took him by his large, lumpy hand and conducted him to the bedroom to see his sweet wife and son, he exclaimed:

'See! Blue ribbon work good and proper. For that Miss Conway, I give you—*this!* I have two ready: one if a son, a smaller one if a daughter. Now you have big one. Eight lucky, see,' cried he. 'Special for you!' He handed me a small red envelope.

I opened it. Inside were eight crisp, *ten pound* notes.

52

Jack's English lessons with Miss Teresa were the highlight of his week. He'd been having them for nearly a year, sometimes two or three times a week. He had suggested that he attend her Sunday group classes but Miss Teresa had replied: 'No, Jack, at your level you need advanced conversation, which is rather *difficult* in a group. It is better that you continue your individual lessons with me.'

What with those lessons, his conversation with Charlie, and his regular trips to the Public Bar at the All Nations, he was able to converse quite easily on everyday topics with a European. His writing was rather better than Charlie's. In truth, he had reached the stage where he really had no need of his individual lessons, but he was more than happy to pay her a shilling if it meant being in her company.

And still he called her 'Miss Teresa'.

One day in August, to Jack's dismay, Terry had suddenly looked up at him and asked: 'You're doing so well now, Jack. Do you think we should continue our lessons?'

'Oh yes, Miss Teresa, I do! You are still teaching me so much! Do you have too many other students, then? Are you too busy for me now?' His deep brown eyes betrayed his hurt.

'I'm certainly busier than I was, Jack.' She paused, leaning towards him as if she wanted to look at him more closely. Her clear blue-green eyes were misty, as if he had just breathed upon them. 'No, I will always have time for you, dear Jack. I just wanted to make sure you liked seeing me.'

'Oh, but I do! I look forward to seeing you so much ...' He dropped his eyes, wishing that he hadn't been sounding too much like an eager schoolboy.

'Wonderful!' She touched his arm lightly, a habit of hers. His forearm instinctively shrank from her touch, but the spot tingled not unpleasantly. He noticed her hesitate as he recoiled but she went on, 'We shall continue then! I shall help you with more colloquial expressions, vocabulary and pronunciation. Also, there are

matters I should care to discuss with you. You know this place so well. How long have you been here?’

‘Over two years.’

‘Two years. So many of you return to China after, what, three years usually, isn’t it? When do you plan to return, Jack?’

‘Never. I plan to stay in Tasmania.’

‘Oh Jack!’ The way she said that, breathing out loudly, looking so happy, pleased yet embarrassed him, a faint echo of the deep embarrassment he had felt when she had kissed him. He changed the subject.

‘Charlie has almost enough money saved for his return. When he goes I would be very sad ...’

‘*Shall* be very sad,’ she interrupted with a smile.

‘*Shall* be very sad,’ he smiled back. ‘But Charlie has a wife and son there. His son was a baby when Charlie left so he does not know his own son ...’

‘*Doesn’t* is not so formal sounding, Jack. So Charlie has a family.’ She looked curious but said no more.

Jack continued. ‘His little boy is called Ah Ping, and he has not, er hasn’t, seen him for, er, seven years. Yes, I shall be sad. Charlie has been like an older brother to me.’

‘What will you do, Jack? Stay here as a miner?’

‘I want not to be a miner. I make enough money then I run business. I do not know yet what.’

‘A family business, perhaps?’ Her eyes swam a little. She did not correct his poor grammar.

‘Oh yes—I should like to marry and have Tasmanian children. Er, one day.’ Yes, I most certainly would like to marry, he said to himself, but not a hope. And he knew it would not be for the reason he then enunciated: ‘But what European woman would wish to marry a poor Chinese tin miner?’

Terry raised her eyebrows. ‘Many do. You’d be surprised.’ She gazed at him steadily, causing him to look away, embarrassed again.

She stood and walked over to him, holding out her hands. ‘Come, Jack.’

He stood awkwardly, wondering what she was doing.

‘Jack,’ she said. ‘Kiss me.’

Jack stood there, stunned. ‘No, I cannot do that.’

She jerked her head back, as if he’d struck her. ‘After all those things we’ve shared together?’

‘I’m sorry, Miss Teresa, but I cannot.’ He stood there like a shy little boy.

‘Why ever not?’

‘I cannot explain why.’

She snorted impatiently, ‘What’s *wrong* with you, Jack?’

He stared at her. ‘Wrong? There is *nothing* wrong with me. Goodbye, Miss Teresa, I must go.’

‘Go, then. Get out of my sight.’

She turned her back on him before he was through the door.

How could he say what was wrong with him? She seemed to think he was deliberately playing games with her. She, for her part, seemed to be trying seduce him. But if so, wondered Jack, how was it? As a woman trying to seduce a man who attracted her—or as a prostitute trying to entice a customer?

Jack asked himself how he could possibly make her understand his position. He liked her very much, he respected her, but wondered if he loved her? He knew from the experience of others that ‘love’ meant something physical; touching, naked intimacy. The horrible truth was that he was distressed by the physicality of a woman’s body. When Purvis had shown him those stereoscopic pictures his immediate reaction was to flee. And it was not just anonymous bodies that affected him so. It was the same when, in that lesson on parts of the body, Miss Teresa had started exposing her shoulders, then the tops of her breasts. Then, too, he had had a feeling of impending catastrophe. Miss Teresa’s kiss, even her holding his hand, had made him struggle to escape. Not that those gestures on her part were in themselves unpleasant, but Jack saw them as signals that something vile and horrible was going to happen. Something to do with those dreadful, shifting visions of his childhood. Black, cold fears rushed through his mind, destroying any initial glow of excitement.

He nearly wept with frustration. Surely, he thought, I cannot allow what happened so long ago to affect me now—and affect me so much that it distorts the way I think about a woman’s body? That a woman’s body is horrifying, when a man’s body is not, is unnatural, against the order of things. Now that I have killed Wu Ying, I must have laid those ancient ghosts to rest, he thought, but evidently I have not. How many Hakkas must I kill to banish these horrors, he asked of the gods he did not believe in, so that I may love a woman the way a man should love her?

Charlie had once told him about men who could not do it with women: ‘impotent’ he’d called them. Charlie had brought the matter up, perhaps he had been fishing because he knew Jack had not visited any of the *gais*. Jack of course did not say anything about himself but it had set him thinking. Was he impotent like those men Charlie had mentioned? He couldn’t say if he was or not. He was aroused positively by a pretty woman at the very first—then negatively. He’d never been close enough to see if he could make love to a woman. There seemed nothing physically wrong with him. He often woke of a morning aroused and stiff, and sometimes he awoke in the night, wet and slippery, after a beautiful dream he was never able to remember.

He recalled Charlie saying, that afternoon over two years ago, when they had first been surprised by the girls and then finding out that they were teachers: ‘Oh well, I shall just have to walk to Thomas Plains for the other service. And you can come with me. It’s about time by the sound of it.’

Indeed it was time, Jack agreed, indeed it was. But why go to Thomas Plains when there are two *gais* living virtually next door? But, he thought horror-struck, what if I failed? What would Miss Teresa then think of me? And what if I succeeded in Thomas Plains, when Miss Teresa clearly wanted me as her lover, and she found out? What would Miss Teresa *then* think of me?

But when it came to thinking about a commercial relationship with Miss Teresa, he was repelled by the thought. Their relationship was personal, which somehow precluded him going to her as a customer. Strange, he mused, I am her customer when learning English and that does not conflict at all with her friendship,

but being her customer for the other does seem to conflict with friendship. Why should that be? Surely it should be an advantage?

On the way back to his hut, which included a long detour through the bush, he wrestled with the enormous imponderables presented by this simple question:

Who is it to be, Miss Teresa or Louisa Price?

53

Tuesday the Eighteenth Day of August, 1891

What an *infuriating* man! Why on earth would he have refused to kiss me? How on earth *could* he have refused to kiss me? What sort of *man* would make such a fuss over such a small request from a supposed friend? As far as I can see, there are three possibilities:

1. Jack cannot stand me.

The case for: He backs away at any suggestion of a closer relationship to me than that of teacher and pupil.

The case against: He smiles at me sometimes in a way that suggests he likes me very much. He thrashed Ah Kit over my honour.

2. Jack is not the full quid as far as manhood goes.

The case for: He is friendly but when friendliness turns to something like the affairs of the heart he backs away, looking horror-struck.

The case against: Jack is as virile and as healthy a specimen as you could find. He is neither callow youth nor fumbling dotard.

2. Jack prefers men.

The case for: He lives with another man (but then so do almost all the other miners, Chinese or European). He shows no flicker of interest, and some considerable disinterest, when it comes to matters *feminine*. He prefers male company. He drinks in town with males, and has *never* given any hint that he has visited a working girl. Certainly not Lizzie or I. His mate Charlie has been to see Liz (why not me, Charlie? Tell me *that!*) and he has also been to that establishment in Thomas Plains where Pete's Lousia carries out her trade. When Lizzie found *that* out she exclaimed: 'Not Charlie ever again, Terry, not now he's had that Lousia tart.' Maybe Jack has visited Louisa too, but I doubt it. He is *such* a prude.

The case against: There isn't one. Oh, only except that he is as unlike a pansy as any man I have known. But then appearances can be *so* deceptive, can they not?

How did I decide between these alternatives? I used Lizzie's *numerological* turn of mind: I counted the number of words *for* each proposition, and deducted the number of words *against*. The verdict is clear.

Jack is *homosexual*.

Damn and blast!

Saturday the Twenty-second Day of August, 1891

I have to find someone else as husband material. A pretty puzzle! I've learned enough in the last two years to know that living amongst these men makes it unlikely that any customer would wish to marry me; or if he did wish to, the chances are low that *I* would wish to marry *him*.

The prospects are grim. I have given comfort, physical or mental—and possibly even spiritual, who knows?—to miners who are either married with wives in China, or young and unmarried but who intend to return to China when they have amassed those 'hundred sovereigns' they keep belly-aching about. So do I forsake my former trade entirely—as I had for over a year—and remain only with teaching? In the day school, I meet the odd father, but as the children are in my moral charge, their fathers cannot be viewed as potential husband material. In the Sunday school, I meet with miners who will be returning to China. I do not wish to go to China. Jack is one of the few who is determined on staying in Tasmania—and the only one, God rot him, who is totally uninterested in marrying *anyone*, let alone little me.

I feel as trapped now as I had been back in *Lalla Rookh*, except that now I at least have my self-respect back.

Around noon, there had been a timid tap on the door.

'*Yap lai la,*' I said automatically; sure to be a Chinese.

It was. Jack stood there, looking just like he did when I first met him; shy, head down.

‘I have come, Miss Teresa. I am sorry when I left you last time. I felt bad.’

Perhaps, I thought with a leaping heart, the other alternatives were all wrong!

Perhaps the reason is:

4. Jack is terribly shy, otherwise normal!

‘Oh Jack, wonderful to see you! What can I do for you?’ I asked coquettishly. I went up to him, my face upturned for that long postponed kiss.

He stepped back, blinking. ‘M-my, er, l-language l-lesson, Miss Teresa.’

‘Your l-language l-lesson.’ I mimicked and immediately regretted that cheap unkindness. ‘Oh, very well Jack.’ I’ll have his shilling even if I can’t have anything else of his. ‘Some conversation, then.’

‘Yes, Miss Teresa.’

‘Do not keep calling me “Miss Teresa” Jack. Please call me Terry.’

‘I cannot. As I have told you, you are my teacher. It would be disrespectful to call you T..., to call you that.’

A conversation then. I considered what would be a likely topic, difficult and hopefully embarrassing. I settled on bound feet. I was very curious about that subject, anyway.

‘Call me what you like. Forget what *I* might like,’ I muttered. I saw that he’d heard it and it had made him uncomfortable. Good. ‘Very well, we shall talk about bound feet. May Ah Chee showed me her bound feet. I was shocked, disgusted, *enraged!* I cannot understand why mothers put their children to such lifelong pain.’

‘They would never be able to marry if their mothers did not do that to them.’

‘Why would men want wives with hurting, smelly, little feet? Are men so cruel?’

‘Men are excited by these small feet. They call them “little lilies”.’

‘Are you excited by little lilies?’ Maybe that’s it, I thought! He’s put off by what’s inside my great big clodhoppers.

‘No.’

Tiresome man. ‘What does excite you then?’ I nearly added: ‘other men perhaps?’

‘Please, do not ask me that.’ He’d dropped his head again. ‘That has nothing to do with bound feet.’

I sighed. ‘Are there other reasons for damaging the feet of little girls?’

‘They are virgins when they marry. A decent and honourable man expects that, *demand*s that!’

Was he trying to tell me something after all? Was *that* it; that I was not a virgin, as whores tend not to be? Maybe I had misjudged him.

But then he continued. ‘After they marry, with those little feet, they cannot easily leave the house. Therefore they are less likely to be unfaithful.’

‘What about the husbands, are they unfaithful?’

‘Some, but many take concubines. But the wife knows that. Therefore it is not being unfaithful.’

‘Chinese men are cruel, selfish bastards!’ I was not liking the way this conversation was going.

‘Please, not all Chinese men, Miss Teresa.’

‘No, Jack. You may at times be cruel, but I do not think you are selfish. But perhaps you *are* a little bit of a bastard,’ I added, smiling to convey the impression that I was joking.

But I was not joking.

54

When Jack had last visited Miss Teresa, he had been in two minds about the purpose of the visit. Would it be for sex, or for a language lesson? He would decide depending on how she reacted on seeing him. But she had confused him with her coquettish smile and the offer of a kiss. He knew it should have worked the other way round, her smile should have encouraged him, but it did not. Here was his friend, here was a *gai* whose services he was considering to purchase, and here was his teacher; all three were rolled up in one paralysing parcel of paper, scissors and stone. He solved the problem with that old Chinese game. His friendship with his teacher comfortably wrapped that stone in paper.

That left Louisa Price as the scissors.

‘Jack, is it? There is lovely. I’m Louisa. Now, what would you fancy then? I charge a crown for the usual.’ Jack nodded. ‘Put your money on the dressing table, then. There’s a good lad you are.’

His heart thudding, Jack stared at the near-pretty girl with the long black hair. Apart from her brown eyes, she was not unlike Miss Teresa, he thought, but coarser looking. She was wearing a long blue petticoat, her nipples dark lumps that drew his unwilling eyes. She noticed him looking. Smiling, she started to slip off the straps.

He called, unnecessarily loudly: ‘No, please. Leave your dress on.’

‘You’re a strange one, you are. But whatever you wish, Jack. Come now.’

She lay on the bed on her back and hauled up her petticoat. She was not wearing underwear.

Jack gasped. *Older Sister* ... A familiar black rush of revulsion rose in his throat, nearly choking him. He turned his back, bending, trying not to gag. He collected himself and, looking very carefully only at her face, said: ‘I’ve not done it before.’

‘Oh, you poor boyo! Come to Lousia then,’ she cooed. ‘Lie down and let me uncoil the serpent.’

He lowered himself beside her. She undid his belt and slipped her hand inside his trousers while he carefully stared at her nose; he couldn't meet her eyes.

'*Diew, diew,*' she murmured, 'soft as a kitten but not as playful. Louisa will soon fix that.' She looked up at him, ran her tongue slowly and wetly around her lips, and bent down.

When Jack saw what she was about to do, a lightning bolt flashed inside his head, lighting up the darkest recesses of his memory. He jumped off the bed, hauled up his trousers and buckled his belt.

'I do not feel well, excuse me.'

'Ooh, you *are* a funny one. Never mind, you. Call back later when you are feelin' *up* to it then,' she laughed good naturedly. 'Oh, and here's your money back. No action, no charge; you can't say fairer than that.' She stood, picked his five shillings up from the dresser, and offered the coin to him.

He waved it aside. 'No, you keep. I must ...'

And was out the door.

Jack was indeed not feeling well; not physically, not mentally. The incident he felt had not only confirmed his worst fear that he was impotent. He could never have children, he could never marry; what woman would have him? But worse even than all that was *that* memory, until so recently just a looming, indistinct black shadow, now cruelly lit in a harsh white light.

Jack badly needed company, not to confide the source of his sorrow and trauma, but rather to take his own mind off it. He headed for the All Nations where he knew Jimmy and Guy would be. He saw them at their usual table. He waved, bought a pint of ale, and joined them.

'Seen that?' Jimmy asked, nodding towards a poster on the wall. 'Big Chan's back in town.'

'What?'

Jack went over to the poster. It announced the visit of Johnny Hayman's All Star Boxing Troupe, fresh from its success in Melbourne. Big Chan, 'The Mongolian Giant', was the star bill: 'Stay one minute in the ring with The Mongolian Giant, and

FIVE POUNDS is yours for the having! Who'll dare to take a glove with him?'

There were also Aboriginal boxers and Chinese acrobats: 'flying like eagles, dashing through flames, displaying inhuman strength, marvellous to behold.'

Jack rejoined his two friends, grinning. 'Who's going to dare take a glove to our old comrade? Guy?'

'Why not you, Jack? You made a mess of Ah Kit.'

'Not I. I think the best we Sek Lung miners could do is to give Johnny Hayman's Troupe the freeze. With luck, he'll lose money on his Thomas Plains visit. The sooner he's off to George's River with the Mongolian Gorilla the better.'

'And speak of the devil,' Guy tapped Jack on the arm, nodding towards the door, 'or rather, devils.'

Ah Kit and Big Chan had just entered the bar. They looked around and saw the three young miners staring at them.

Big Chan lifted his lip in his characteristic snarl, then surprised them by smiling and waving his hand in greeting. Ah Kit also smiled at them, a sly, nasty smile. Both newcomers went to the bar, where they ordered drinks and sat down to chat.

'What an unholy alliance they make,' said Jimmy. 'But enough of them. Jack, what's up, mate? You look like you've lost two bob and found a penny.' Jimmy always talked as if showing off his mastery of Australian English. Not that it mattered; most of their conversation was in Cantonese anyway.

'Yeah, I'm not feeling too bright. Nothing in particular.'

'Not doing too well in those *English* lessons with pretty little Terry, eh Jack?' Guy asked with a smirk

'They are going very well. Miss Teresa is an excellent teacher,' Jack replied stiffly. 'And they *are* English lessons. And that's all they are.' He felt his anger rising with each word he uttered. He remained silent for a while then burst out: 'Just you be careful, Guy, remember what happened to *him*.' He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to where Ah Kit had been sitting. He hadn't noticed that he and Big Chan had drunk up quickly and were already preparing to leave. Jack couldn't help himself. He lowered his head towards Guy and hissed: 'Just be fucking *careful*!'

‘Shit, Jack! No offence, mate.’ Both Guy and Jimmy glanced at each other, each looking more astonished than the other. Guy touched his arm, ‘Sorry, Jack, really I am.’

Jack felt like crying. He’d never been so aggressive to a mate before. Things were getting too much for him. He had to leave.

He stood. ‘I’m so sorry I said that. I’m just, just not feeling myself these days. Look, I’ll go. You stay.’

‘Jack, do you think that’s wise? Those two have just left. The Mongolian Gorilla may be lurking out there. We’ll come with you.’ Jimmy half stood, laying his hand on Jack’s arm.

‘No, no, I’ll be alright. Those two buggers don’t worry me. I need a good sleep, that’s the problem. Haven’t been sleeping well lately. You stay, finish your drinks.’

Outside in the fresh air, Jack immediately felt better. A good brisk walk home and he’d be tired enough to sleep deeply enough to smother his mental pain.

Jack had just turned the sharp bend after the first hill when he saw in the moonlight a large figure, arms folded, standing in the centre of the road just a few yards away. It was Big Chan. He didn’t grimace his snarl, but smiled again, almost kindly.

‘Well, Yang, nice to see you again. Very nice indeed.’

Jack wasn’t a coward but he was realistic enough to know he hadn’t a hope in a close-up fight with Big Chan, but he could easily outrun him. He turned to dash back the way he had come, but Ah Kit had sprung from the bushes, blocking his retreat.

An instant later, he was enveloped in a powerful bear-hug from behind. His arms were pinned, his ribcage crushed, his lungs empty of air.

Ah Kit was smiling, pointing to his broken nose. ‘Thank you for that, Yang. Now it’s my turn.’

Ah Kit drew his fist back and Jack swung his head sideways at the crucial moment. His fist slammed into Jack’s left eyesocket and then glanced off, hitting Big Chan on his nose. Jack felt the bear-hug loosen enough for him to break free, but Ah

Kit was too quick. He jabbed his other fist into Jack's solar plexus, winding him excruciatingly. Jack doubled over, his face meeting Ah Kit's fist again. Simultaneously, Big Chan yelled, 'HAI! HAI!', as he karate-chopped both of Jack's arms with a scissor motion.

Jack fell to the ground, the sounds of shouting filling his ears. He noticed Ah Kit preparing to kick him in the groin; he curled up into a ball. There was an explosion of pain for a second.

Then all was peace.

55

Sunday the Twenty-third Day of August, 1891 (and very early in the morning)

I lay in bed for hours, stewing over my last meeting with Jack. Having arrived at the conclusion that I had been much too unkind to him, I fell into an uneasy sleep. What felt like seconds later, I was awakened by a loud pounding on the door.

‘Miss Teresa, Miss Teresa,’ voices were shouting. Two voices by the sound of it, neither being Jack’s. Alarmed, I slipped on my gown and ran to the door.

Jimmy and Guy were there. Stocky little Guy, strong as a horse, had a *body* over his shoulders.

‘Jack’s been beaten up, Miss Teresa. He is hurt. Could you give him first aid?’ asked Jimmy.

I tried to mask my shock. *Had he done something to himself? Had I upset him that much?* ‘Of course, bring him in. Quickly, now. Lay him *gently* on the floor before the fire, it’s still warm. What on earth *happened?*’

Lizzie appeared at the door of her room, clutching her gown around her. ‘Who beat up poor bloody Jack?’ she demanded.

I looked at poor bloody Jack, lying unconscious on his back on the floor. The left side of his face certainly was bloody, his eye swollen. His arms looked strange and his legs were drawn up, as if in pain. What on earth do I *do?* Words like concussion, broken skull, ribs, flew through my brain; then healing words like brandy, splints, bandages, ‘don’t move the patient’, followed suit. I placed my head against his chest; at least his heart hadn’t stopped. I opened the eyelid of his right eye; his eye wasn’t a blank, white marble, which I think was a good sign.

‘Do you men know any first aid?’

Both Guy and Jimmy shook their heads. Entirely up to me then.

We had some Condy’s crystals in the cupboard; I placed a tablespoonful in a basin and filled it with warm water while Lizzie tore an old sheet into bandages. I thought surely I must have learned *something* about the body from my study of midwifery, other than those parts directly relevant to the production of babies.

While we worked, Jimmy told us what had happened. They had met Jack in the pub, then Ah Kit and Big Chan arrived and, seeing them, left quickly. Jack had been upset over something and left on his own. Worried about him, Jimmy and Guy had left soon after to find Jack about a mile down Emu Flat Road. He'd just been beaten up by Ah Kit and Big Chan, who had fled when they arrived. Jimmy and Guy had carried him here in turns.

'Why not back to Thomas Plains? That's closer,' Lizzie asked.

'Because that's where those two went. Carrying Jack, we wouldn't have had a chance if we ran into them. Also,' he paused, with an embarrassed smile, 'we thought you might be the best person to help, Miss Teresa.'

'Miss Teresa' from those two who had previously known me as Terry! *Wasn't* Jack a man of influence? 'Now just why would you think that?' I asked.

'It is because it was something to do with you, Miss. I mentioned your name to Jack and he lost his temper. That is why he was upset.'

'What did you say about me?' I demanded.

Guy blushed and stared at the floor. 'I only asked him how his language lessons were going, Miss Teresa. That's all, honest to God!'

'I don't understand it either, Miss, but Jack blew his top at that. He got up and left,' Jimmy went on. 'We warned him Big Chan was out there, certainly lying in wait for him, but he wouldn't listen. So we followed him, carefully not to reveal ourselves so we could surprise them. We'd never be able to handle them otherwise.'

'The attack happened so quickly, in a matter of seconds. We started shouting in different voices to give the impression that there were many more than just the two of us. We saw Jack on the ground and Ah Kit put the boot in something vicious. Then they both fled.'

Guy's question about Jack's language lessons was innocent enough on the surface, but I could imagine the innuendo it could carry to Jack even if none was intended, given his recent frame of mind. A *sensitivity* on Jack's part no doubt engendered in large part by my rudeness to him. So was I responsible for Jack's fate? I had to push such questions back into a distant recess of my mind to reflect upon later. Now I had a heavy task to perform and told myself I must remain calm.

Jack's facial injuries were obvious enough, but I couldn't tell what lay beneath, especially where Ah Kit had kicked him. Ah Kit was a powerful man and could have done much damage. Gingerly, we removed Jack's clothing. Lizzie assured the two men that we'd both seen a naked man before today yet we girls both looked away while they removed his trousers—why, I don't know, except that it seemed *fitting*. We turned back to join in the inspection of Jack's upper body. His left upper arm was swollen and deep purple in colour, possibly broken, his right shoulder was out of its socket.

'Ah, that's Big Chan's work,' Jimmy breathed. 'His special punishment was to break the arms of his victims, but he appears to have only partially succeeded here.'

I felt around the swelling. 'We should place a splint on that just in case it is broken. I think I can replace his shoulder, but we shall have to fetch a doctor in the morning, first thing.'

But where Ah Kit had kicked him was very worrying; I couldn't avoid joining in the inspection of his remaining injuries but I *prayed* Jack would remain unconscious. He would have *died* of embarrassment had he known 'Miss Teresa' had seen him while he lay thus naked. His stomach and lower back were badly bruised, as were his upper thighs, but what lay betwixt seemed to be unhurt. And I have to say too, Hermione, that I felt myself blushing; strange was it not, considering *everything*?

'Ah Kit did that,' Jimmy indicated the dreadful bruising on Jack's legs and lower body. 'He was aiming at his groin, but Jack was curled up which seems to have protected, er, him,' Jimmy murmured not looking at me.

'Jimmy, you'd better wash him with Condy's then replace his trousers. We'll attend to his arms.'

Lizzie's experience with Pete helped her to fashion a temporary splint, while I thought I'd try to relocate his shoulder while he was still insensible.

'What comes out must go in, I suppose. You two, hold him firmly.'

I felt very carefully and worked out in what direction to pull to replace the arm in its socket. While I was feeling around, Jack stirred. *Quick, quick, this must be*

done quickly, I urged myself. Jack grunted horribly as I replaced his arm back into his shoulder socket. His body convulsed as it clicked back into place, but he didn't awaken.

And I burst into tears.

Hermione, had you not been thinking what a *cold fish* was your Older Sister? Here was I calmly listening to the facts of what had happened, and considering how I might best go about administering first aid to a badly beaten man; a man who only last week was in my sights as my future husband! And who now appeared to have made himself vulnerable to this vicious attack because of some concern about *me*. Prior to that heart-rending *click* that signified restoration, I had shut down my heart so my mind could work properly. But immediately after that, my heart burst.

Jack had been seriously injured, could have *died*, because he had stood up for my honour! His beating of Ah Kit had set in train these entirely expected events. And he had not flinched from them one inch. He had gone alone into the night, knowing his bitter enemies were out there, violent men both. And all because of me.

Jack, Jack, my darling man, what have I done to you? How can I ever repay you? Well, I concluded, I would have to treat his wounds as best I could for a start. Then what happened after that was out of my hands.

'Jimmy, Guy, please most *carefully* carry Jack into the next door room and place him on my bed. There he shall rest until morning. I shall sleep with Lizzie.'

The two men moved to depart.

'Thank you both. In the morning, can you arrange for a visit here by the doctor? Never mind the cost. I shall meet that.' I kissed each lightly on the cheek.

I turned to Lizzie. 'And tomorrow, would you go with them to Thomas Plains and telegraph your friend Matthew? We have evidence enough, I think, to see Ah Kit and Big Chan behind bars.'

56

Later that Sunday the Twenty-third Day of August, 1891

I went to Jack's room several times to see if he had regained consciousness. On one occasion he lay there groaning, but it was hard to tell if he was truly awake. He did not respond to my whispers. Then, in the coldest part of the night, immediately before dawn, I thought I would lie in bed beside him, to keep both himself and myself warm. And thus, I fell asleep.

I awoke to a violent movement. Jack had awoken.

'M-Miss Teresa ... *deema?* Where, how...?' He struggled to get out of bed but groaned with pain and collapsed back again.

'Jack, Jack, you are injured, don't try to talk. You are in my house and I'm here to look after you. The doctor will be coming later this morning.'

He turned his one working eye, full of puzzlement and anguish, to me. 'But you are in my bed ...'

'No, Jack, you are in *mine*. Now, relax, relax.' On a sudden impulse, I stroked his hair and the good side of face. I started to sing softly, like a mother to a hurt child:

Rock-a-bye baby on the tree top,

When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.

And back to sleep he went. A good sleep, I could tell, not the sleep of nature's anaesthetic against pain.

And so, too soon, did I.

I was on the lookout by the door when I saw him coming, and a strange spectacle did Dr. Hayes make. I was looking at a stovepipe hat, atop a small rubber ball, atop a large rubber ball, all of which were atop a horse. The apparition stopped outside the house.

'Miss Conway, I presume?' said he, raising his hat and smiling like a goanna.

‘I am she. Thank you so much for coming. Mr. Yang is inside.’

The spherical doctor dismounted with amazing agility, tying the reins of his horse around a handy gum tree. Clutching his bag, he followed me into the house.

He inspected Jack, confirmed his upper left arm was indeed fractured, pronounced Lizzie’s splint as satisfactory and congratulated me on replacing his right shoulder. ‘As fine a job, Miss Conway, as ever I have seen performed by a non-medical person.’ He decided that there was no internal damage but only bruising to Jack’s stomach, and prescribed time as the best medicine.

‘Ah yes, apart from a small phial of laudanum,’ which he produced from his little black bag, ‘to be taken in moments of severe pain; and likewise apart from my fee. Two guineas, if you would now kindly so oblige.’

Having pocketed the fee—which I thought a trifle excessive for one, possibly two, hour’s work including travel—he doffed his hat once more, and with even more agility than heretofore, he swung into the saddle, and trotted back to Thomas Plains.

But it was worth every penny of two guineas to know I need concern myself no longer with Jack’s physical condition. What sorely puzzled me now was *why* Jack had been so depressed, then so angry, then so foolhardy—and all, it seemed, because of me. Which in turn suggested that my conclusion, that Jack was not interested in women, was entirely incorrect.

But this only left me even more sorely puzzled as to the real nature of this man called Jack Yang.

The patient looked so sorry for himself, lying on his back, staring at me with his one eye, the other shortly to become the most impressive shiner ever seen in Emu Flat.

‘Miss Teresa, I cannot occupy your bed any longer. I would like to return to my house.’

‘Very well, Jack, but not until we have had a little chat, you and I. And as it is such a cold winter’s day, and I am shivering, I am going to climb into bed with you.’

His one eye widened in alarm, so I added: ‘Fully clothed, Jack, no need to worry.’

I slipped in beside him. 'Now, Jack, you have undergone this suffering all because of me.'

He stirred, grunting negative noises.

'Shush. Guy told me. And he said that you were very upset; so angry and so *stupid* as to walk into the obvious trap Ah Kit had set. We haven't been on very good terms recently, you and I, Jack. I may have been a little forward, but not by my standards, and I don't think even by yours. I don't deserve your rejection of me.'

He didn't respond, so I added: 'I *love* you, Jack Yang.'

He put on his little-boy-lost look. 'I love you too, Miss Teresa, you are a dear friend to me.'

'I don't mean like a *friend*, you silly goose. I mean like a woman for a man.'

'I can only love you as a friend, Miss Teresa.'

'Then for God's sake, call your friend *Terry*!'

He flinched at the sharpness of my tone. 'Terry,' he whispered. In alarm, I saw tears well up in his good eye.

I dabbed his face with my handkerchief. 'Tell me Jack, what *is* it?'

He was silent for a long time until finally he whispered so softly I could barely hear him. 'I am impotent.'

So it was my Number Two reason after all. He probably did love me, and not like a friend, but couldn't do a blind thing about it.

I nodded. 'Thank you for telling me, Jack. It was brave of you.' I lay back, him beside me, wondering what to do next. There seemed nothing much to say after that admission, which must have cost him a lot. So I just lay there.

It soon occurred to me that this was probably the best chance I'd ever have of getting to the bottom of the Wu Ying story. He still hadn't told me about that.

'Jack, why did you hate Wu Ying so much? So much that you had to kill him?'

He was silent for so long that I was about to ask again, thinking he hadn't heard me.

‘When I was six, our entire village was razed by the Hairy Thieves,’ he finally whispered. Then in a louder voice and raising his head, he asked, ‘You remember who the Hairy Thieves are? Charlie told you, in the cart ...’

‘Yes, Jack, I remember.’ I didn’t, but I wanted him to get on with his story.

‘I ... I was in the forest looking for mushrooms when I heard this shouting, women and children screaming, columns of smoke pouring skywards. I was terrified.’

He turned his head as if for reassurance. I stroked his cheek, his hair.

He continued. ‘I crept under the cover of the forest then wriggled through long grass to see what was happening. I heard sharp military commands, and the clattering of horses’ hooves. I peered through the grass, and there, feet away, a file of Hairy Thieves mounted on huge brown horses were trotting away from the smoking ruins of my village. The leading horsemen bore a large tattered black silk flag. I froze in fear. I waited for them to pass. When they had gone, I ran back to the village ... to what was the village.’

I took his hand in mine and squeezed it, to reassure him.

‘As I approached my home, I heard a girl screaming, terrible screams they were. We lived near the edge of a rice field so I was able to get close and not be seen. What I saw was a scene from the depths of hell. My home was nothing but a shell of hot stone, a giant, ruined, pig oven. Outside was a pile of charred bodies, like discarded, overcooked pigs ...’ Jack stopped, gulping, swallowing, trying to remain calm.

‘Oh, Jack.’ I too was now weeping.

‘And ... and... worse. That screaming! Until last night I could never remember what happened next. Just terrifying nightmares, ever changing. Then, last night, something happened ... it made it all come back...’

‘What was it Jack, what happened last night? Was it those thugs who beat you?’

‘No, before then. It was ... it was ...’

Jack was blushing, as if he was having trouble telling me.

‘I was with Louisa Price ...’

‘*Jack!*’ A flash of jealousy *seared* through me, Hermione, and then I saw that the poor fellow was probably trying to do something about his impotence—and had failed. But what had this to do with his story? ‘Sorry Jack, go on.’

‘The screaming was Older Sister. Outside the burning house. She was naked, a Hairy Thief, his trousers around his ankles ... he threw her on the ground ... he fell on top of her ... he shouted something ... ’

‘Jack, Jack, *please* don’t go on ... ’

‘No, let me tell you, I must.’ Jack stopped for a long time, breathing deeply, then he shouted: ‘He drew his sword and slashed off her head!’ He continued in a loud rant. ‘Grabbing her head in both his hands, he rammed her gaping mouth against his ... ’ He stopped.

I couldn’t look at him. What comfort could I give against such an atrocity?

But then he was calmer, his voice lower, more controlled. ‘I had to get away from that ... that ... I ran back the way I had come, as fast as I could. I had no idea where I was going. I kept running until I came to a path. I stopped, shocked and terrified, for there in front of me was the man who’d done that to Older Sister! He was on a horse. Seeing me, he snarled, baring his teeth like a mad dog. He whipped his sword from his scabbard. I turned to run away, but he leaned down from the saddle, his sword in front of my face.

‘He stroked my cheek with it. It left a smear on my cheek of ... of ... Older Sister’s blood. His snarl turned into a grin. He leaned down further, his face a foot from mine. “No, little fellow, I won’t kill you now. You go back home. See what we have done!” He sat upright slamming his sword back into its scabbard; he wheeled his horse around and galloped after the others. But I already knew what he’d done. I’d seen him doing it ... ’

‘Oh Jack, you poor sweetheart ... ’ I sat upright, unable to control the sobs that shook me. Poor, *poor* Jack having to live with this terrible, terrible memory ... Then it hit me. That horseman had been Wu Ying—and I had given Jack his instrument of vengeance, Wu Ying’s revolver. I bent to kiss him.

‘There Jack, you, we, have avenged your family now.’

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THE NORTH-EASTERN ADVERTISER, 1ST OCTOBER, 1941**SCOTTSDALE COUPLE CELEBRATE GOLDEN WEDDING:
A CHEERING NOTE FOR THESE DARK TIMES**

Well-known Scottsdale couple, Jack and Teresa Yang, today celebrate their Golden Wedding with their family, friends and well wishers. The Yangs arrived in Scottsdale just short of fifty years ago with their twin babies and their lifelong business partner and boon companion Miss Elizabeth Wiggins. From this humble beginning, Yang & Wiggins grew to become one of the largest transport firms in the North-East. Jack Yang has also at various times been Warden of Scottsdale, Worshipful Master of Dorset Masonic Lodge, and a staunch member of the Methodist Parish Council amongst many other acts of public service—an astonishing record for a young Chinaman who was penniless when he stepped onto the shores of our fair Isle! Mrs. Teresa Yang, for her part, has been equally as active in her contribution to the public weal,

especially in the field of education. Her skills of tutelage unlocked the door to the literary glories of our British Heritage to many a man unfortunate enough not to possess English as his Mother Tongue. Not least of their contributions to our happy community has been the Yangs' splendid gift of three stout sons and two beautiful daughters, one of whom is, as we know, a renowned beauty of stage and screen! Jack and Teresa, your children and your grandchildren, your special friend Miss Wiggins, and your fellow citizens of the fair town of Scottsdale, all join with the staff of this newspaper to congratulate you on your fifty years of married bliss! We look forward eagerly to the swift passage of ten more years so we may celebrate with you—your Diamond Wedding!