BECKE LOUIS

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Содержание

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TO MY DEAR OLD COMRADES
North Queensland.
December, 1908

CHAPTER I ~ "CHINKIE'S FLAT"

"Chinkie's Flat," In its decadence, was generally spoken of, by the passing traveller, as a "God-forsaken hole," and it certainly did present a repellent appearance when seen for the first time, gasping under the torrid rays of a North Queensland sun, which had dried up every green thing except the silver-leaved ironbarks, and the long, sinuous line of she-oaks which denoted the course of Connolly's Creek on which it stood.

"The township" was one of the usual Queensland mining type, a dozen or so of bark-roofed humpies, a public-house with the title of "The Digger's Best," a blacksmith's forge, and a quartz-crushing battery.

The battery at Chinkie's Flat stood apart from the "township" on a little rise overlooking the yellow sands of Connolly's Creek, from whence it derived its water supply—when there happened to be any water in that part of the creek. The building which covered the antiquated five-stamper battery, boiler, engine, and tanks, was merely a huge roof of bark supported on untrimmed posts of brigalow and swamp gum, but rude as was the structure, the miners at Chinkie's Flat, and other camps in the vicinity, had once been distinctly proud of their battery, which possessed the high-sounding title of "The Ever Victorious," and had achieved fame by having in the "good times" of the Flat yielded a certain Peter Finnerty two thousand ounces of gold from a hundred tons

of alluvial. The then owner of the battery was an intelligent, but bibulous ex-marine engineer, who had served with Gordon in China, and when he erected the structure he formally christened it "The Ever Victorious," in memory of Gordon's army, which stamped out the Taeping rebellion.

The first crushing put through was Finnerty's, and when the "clean-up" was over, and the hundreds of silvery balls of amalgam placed in the retorts turned out over one hundred and sixty-six pounds' weight of bright yellow gold, Chinkie's Flat went wild with excitement and spirituous refreshment.

In less than three months there were over five hundred diggers on the field, and the "Ever Victorious" banged and pounded away night and day, the rattle and clang of the stamps only ceasing at midnight on Saturday, and remaining silent till midnight on Sunday, the Sabbath being devoted "to cleaning-up," retorting the amalgam, and overhauling and repairing the machinery, and for relaxation, organising riding parties of twenty or thirty, and chasing Chinamen, of whom there were over three hundred within a radius of twenty miles.

The rich alluvial of Chinkie's Flat had, as a matter of fact, been first discovered by a number of Chinese diggers, who were each getting from five to ten ounces of gold per day, when they were discovered by the aforesaid Peter Finnerty, who was out prospecting with a couple of mates. Their indignation that a lot of heathen "Chows" should be scooping up gold so easily, while they, Christians and legitimate miners, should be toiling over

the barren ridges day after day without striking anything, was so great that for the moment, as they sat on their horses and viewed the swarming Chinese working their cradles on the bank of the creek, the power of speech deserted them. Hastily turning their tired horses' heads, they rode as hard as they could to the nearest mining camp, and on the following day thirty hairy-faced foreign-devils came charging into the Chinese camp, uttering fearful threats, and shooting right and left (with blank cartridges). The Chinese broke and fled, and in half an hour each of the thirty men had pegged out a claim, and Chinkie's Flat became famous as one of the richest, though smallest, alluvial diggings in the Far North.

Three months after the "discovery" of the field by Mr. Peter Finnerty, old "Taeping," as Gordon's ex-marine engineer had been promptly nicknamed, arrived with his crushing battery, and then indeed were halcyon days for the Flat. From early morn till long past midnight, the little bar of the "Digger's Best" was crowded with diggers, packhorsemen and teamsters; a police trooper arrived and fixed his tent on the ridge overlooking the creek, and then—the very zenith of prosperity—a bank official followed, and a stately building, composed of a dozen sheets of bark for a roof, and floor sacks for the sides, was erected and opened for business on the same day, amid much rejoicing and a large amount of liquid refreshment dispensed by the landlord of the "hotel" at a shilling per nobbler.

For six months longer all went well: more alluvial patches

were discovered in the surrounding country, and then several rich reefs were found a mile away from the Flat, and every day new men arrived from Cooktown to the north, and Brisbane, Sydney, and far New Zealand to the south. Three new "hotels" sprang up; the police force was increased by another trooper and two black trackers, who rode superciliously around the camp, carbines on thighs, in their dark blue uniforms with scarlet facings, and condescended to drink with even the humblest white man; and then came the added glory of the "Chinkie's Flat Gold Escort"—when a police van with an Irish sergeant, two white troopers, and eight black police rattled through the camp, and pulled up at the bank, which now had a corrugated iron roof, a proper door, and two windows, and (the manager's own private property) a tin shower bath suspended by a cord under the verandah, a seltzogene, and a hen with seven chickens. The manager himself was a young sporting gentleman of parts, and his efforts to provide Sunday recreation for his clients were duly appreciated—he was secretary of the Chinkie's Flat Racing Club (meeting every alternate Sunday), and he and old "Taeping" between them owned a dozen of kangaroo dogs, which lived on the community generally, and afforded much exciting sport every Saturday, either in hunting kangaroos or Chinamen, both of which were plentiful in the vicinity.

For although Peter Finnerty and his party had succeeded in driving away the heathen from the Flat itself, the continued further discoveries of rich alluvial had brought them swarming

into the district from all the other gold-fields in the colony in such numbers that it was impossible to keep the almond-eyed mining locusts out, especially as the Government was disposed to give them a measure of protection—not from any unnatural sentiment, but purely because they were revenue producers, and the Government badly wanted money. Then, too, their camps were so large, and so many of them were armed, and disposed to fight when in a corner, that the breaking up of a "Chows' Camp" became more and more difficult, and in the end the white diggers had to be content with surprising outlying prospecting parties, chasing them with kangaroo dogs back to their main camp, and burning their huts and mining gear, after first making a careful search for gold, concealed under the earthen floor, or among their ill-smelling personal effects. Sometimes they were rewarded, sometimes not, but in either case they were satisfied that they were doing their duty to Queensland and themselves by harrying the heathen who raged so furiously, and were robbing the country of its gold.

Then, after old "Taeping" had succumbed to too much "Digger's Rest," and Finnerty—now Peter Grattan Finnerty, Esq., Member of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland—had left the Flat and become the champion of the "struggling white miner" in the House at a salary of £300 a year, came bad times, for the alluvial became worked out; and in parties of twos and threes the old hands began to leave, heading westward across the arid desert towards the Gilbert and the Etheridge Rivers,

dying of thirst or under the spears of the blacks by the way, but ever heedless of what was before when the allurements and potentialities of a new field lay beyond the shimmering haze of the sandy horizon.

Then, as the miners left, the few "cockatoo" settlers followed them, or shifted in nearer to the town on the sea-coast with their horse and bullock teams, and an ominous silence began to fall upon the Flat when the tinkle of the cattle bells no longer was heard among the dark fringe of sighing she-oaks bordering the creek. As day by day the quietude deepened, the parrots and pheasants and squatter pigeons flew in and about the Leichhardt trees at the foot of the bluff, and wild duck at dusk came splashing into the battery dam, for there was now no one who cared to shoot them; the merry-faced, rollicking, horse-racing young bank manager and his baying pack of gaunt kangaroo dogs had vanished with the rest; and then came the day when but eight men remained—seven being old hands, and the eighth a stranger, who, with a blackboy, had arrived the previous evening.

And had it not been for the coming of the stranger, Chinkie's Flat would, in a few weeks, have been left to solitude, and reported to the Gold-fields Warden as "abandoned and duffered out."

CHAPTER II ~ GRAINGER MAKES A "DEAL"

Three years before Edward Grainger had been the leader of a small prospecting party which had done fairly well on the rivers debouching into the Gulf of Carpentaria from the western side of Cape York Peninsula. He was an Englishman, his mates were all Australian-born, vigorous, sturdy bushmen, inured to privation and hardship, and possessing unbounded confidence in their leader, though he was by no means the oldest man of the party, and not a "native." But Grainger had had great experience as an explorer and prospector, for he had been compelled to begin the battle of life when but a lad of fifteen. His father, once a fairly wealthy squatter in the colony of Victoria, was ruined by successive droughts, and died leaving his station deeply mortgaged to the bank, which promptly foreclosed, and Mrs. Grainger found herself and two daughters dependent upon her only son, a boy of fifteen, for a living. He, however, was equal to the occasion. Leaving his mother and sisters in lodgings in Melbourne, he made his way to New South Wales with a mob of travelling cattle, earning his pound a week and rations. At Sydney he worked on the wharves as a lumper, and then joined in the wild rush to the famous Tambaroora diggings, and was fortunate enough to meet with remunerative employment, and

from then began his mining experiences, which in the course of the following ten years took him nearly all over the Australian colonies, New Zealand, and Tasmania. Never making much money, and never very "hard up," he had always managed to provide for his mother and sisters; and when he formed his prospecting party to Cape York and sailed from Brisbane, he knew that they would not suffer from any financial straits for at least two years.

For nearly three years he and his party wandered from one river to another along the torrid shores of the great gulf, sometimes doing well, sometimes not getting enough gold to pay for the food they ate, but always, always hopeful of the day when they would "strike it rich." Then came misfortune—sharp and sudden.

Camped on the Batavia River during the wet season, the whole party of five sickened with malaria, and found themselves unable to move to the high land at the head of the river owing to all their horses having died from eating "poison plant." Too weak to travel by land, they determined to build a raft and reach the mouth of the river, where there was a small cattle station. Here they intended to remain till the end of the rains, buy fresh horses and provisions, and return and prospect some of the deep gullies and watercourses at the head of the Batavia River.

Scarcely had they completed the raft, and loaded it with their effects, when they were rushed by a mob of blacks, and in a few seconds two of the five were gasping out their lives from spear

wounds, and all the others were wounded. Fortunately for the survivors, Grainger had his revolver in his belt, and this saved them, for he at once opened fire on the savages, whilst the other men worked the raft out into the middle of the stream, where they were out of danger from spears and able to use their rifles.

After a terrible voyage of three days, and suffering both from their wounds and the bone-racking agonies of fever, they at last reached the cattle station, where they were kindly received in the rough, hospitable fashion common to all pioneers in Australia. But, when at the end of a month one of Grainger's mates died of his wounds, and the other bade him goodbye and went off in a pearling lugger to Thursday Island, the leader sickened of Cape York Peninsula, and turned his face southwards once more, in the hope that fortune would be more kind to him on the new rushes at the Cloncurry, seven hundred miles away. From the station owner he bought six horses, and with but one black-boy for a companion, started off on his long, long journey through country which for the most part had not yet been traversed even by the explorer.

Travelling slowly, prospecting as he went, and adding a few ounces of gold here and there to the little bag he carried in his saddle-pouch, quite three months passed ere he and the black boy reached the Cloncurry. Here, however, he found nothing to tempt him—the field was overcrowded, and every day brought fresh arrivals, and so, after a week's spell, he once more set out, this time to the eastward towards the alluvial fields near the Burdekin

River, of which he had heard.

It was at the close of a long day's ride over grassless, sun-smitten country, that he came in sight of Chinkie's Flat, and the welcome green of the she-oaks fringing Connolly's Creek and soughing to the wind. The quietness and verdancy of the creek pleased him, and he resolved to have a long, long spell, and try and get rid of the fever which had again attacked him and made his life a misery.

Riding up to the hotel he found a party of some twenty or more diggers who were having a last carouse—for the "benefit" of the landlord–ere they bade goodbye to Chinkie's Flat on the following evening. Among them were two men who had become possessed of the "Ever Victorious" battery, left to them by the recently deceased "Taeping," who had succumbed to alleged rum and bad whiskey. They jocularly offered Grainger the entire plant for twenty-five pounds and his horses. He made a laughing rejoinder and said he would take a look at the machine in the morning. He meant to have a long spell, he said, and Chinkie's Flat would suit him better than Townsville or Port Denison to pull up, as hotels there were expensive and he had not much money. Then, as was customary, he returned the drink he had accepted from them by shouting for all hands, and was at once voted "a good sort."

In the morning he walked down to the deserted battery, examined it carefully, and found that although it was in very bad order, and deficient especially in screens—the one greatest

essential—it was still capable of a great deal of work. Then he washed off a dish or two of tailings from one of the many heaps about, and although he had no acid, nor any other means of making a proper test in such a short time, his scientific knowledge acquired on the big gold-fields of the southern colonies and New Zealand showed him that there was a very heavy percentage of gold still to be won from the tailings by simple and inexpensive treatment.

"I'll buy the thing," he said to himself; "I can't lose much by doing so, and there's every chance of saving a good deal of gold, if I once get some fine screens, and that will only take six weeks or so."

By noon the "deal" was completed, and in exchange fer twenty-five pounds in cash, six horses and their saddlery, Grainger, amid much good-humoured chaff from the vendors, took possession of the "Ever Victorious" crushing mill, together with some thousands of tons of tailings, but when he announced his intention of putting the plant in order and crushing for the "public" generally, as well as for himself, six men who yet had some faith in the field and believed that some of the many reefs would pay to work, elected to stay, especially when Grainger said that if their crushings turned out "duffers" he would charge them nothing for using the battery.

At one o'clock that day there were but eight Europeans and one black boy left on the once noisy Chinkie's Flat—the landlord of "The Digger's Best," six miners, Grainger, and the black

boy, "Jacky," who had accompanied him on his arduous journey from the Batavia River. At Grainger's request they all met at the public-house! and sat down to a dinner of salt meat, damper, and tea, and after it was finished and each man had lit his pipe, Grainger went into details.

"Now, boys, this is how the thing hangs. I've bought the old rattletrap because I believe there's a lot of life in the old girl yet, and I'm going to spend all the money I have in putting her in order and getting some new gear up from Brisbane or Sydney. If I lose my money I won't grumble, but I don't think I *shall* lose it if you will agree to give some of the reefs a thorough good trial. As I told you, I won't ask you for a penny if the stone I crush for you turns out no good; but it is my belief—and I know what I am talking about—that there are a thousand tons of surface stuff lying around this field which will give half an ounce to an ounce to the ton if it is put through a decent machine. And I'm going to make the old 'Ever Victorious' a pretty decent battery before long. But it's no good my spending my money—I possess only four hundred pounds—if you don't back me up and lend a hand."

"You're the man for us," said one of the men; "we'll stick to you and do all the bullocking. But the battery is very old, and we have the idea that old Taeping wasn't much of a boss of a crushing mill, and didn't know much about amalgamation."

Grainger nodded: "I am sure of it. I don't believe that he saved more than 50 per cent, of the gold from the surface stuff he put through, and not more than a third from the stone.... Well, boys,

what is it to be?"

The men looked at each other for a moment or two, and then they one and all emphatically asserted their intention of remaining on the field, assisting Grainger in repairing the plant and raising trial crushings of stone from every reef on the field.

"That's all right, then, boys," said Grainger. "Now you go ahead and raise the stone, and as soon as I am a bit stronger I'll start off for the Bay and buy what I want in the way of screens, grinding pans, quicksilver, and other gear. I'm almost convinced that with new, fine screens we shall get good results out of the stone, and if we are disappointed, then well tackle that heap of tailings. I've seen a lot of tailings treated without being roasted in Victoria, and understand the process right enough."

"Well, we'll do our share of yacker, mister," said a man named Dick Scott.

"And I'll do mine. As soon as I am fit some of you must lend me a couple of horses, and I'll ride down to the Bay.[1] I daresay I can get all that we want there in the way of machinery without my going or sending to Brisbane for it."

On the following morning work was started by the six men, the landlord of the public-house agreeing to cook for all hands for the first week, while Grainger and the black boy (though the former was still very weak from recurrent attacks of ague) tried numberless prospects from all parts of the heaps of tailings. At

[1] The present city of Townsville, then always called "The Bay," it being situated on the shores of Cleveland Bay.

the end of a week the miners began to raise some very likely-looking stone! and Grainger, finding some jars of muriatic acid among the stores belonging to the battery, made some further tests of the tailings with results which gave him the greatest satisfaction. He, however, said nothing about this to his new mates, intending to give them a pleasant surprise later on in the week before he left on his journey to the coast.

At six o'clock one evening, just as the men were returning from the claim for supper, Jacky, the black boy, was seen coming along the track at a fast canter. He had been out looking for some cattle belonging to Jansen the landlord, which had strayed away among the ranges.

"What's the matter, Jacky?" asked the men, as the boy jumped off his horse.

"I bin see him plenty feller Chinaman come along road. Altogether thirty-one. Close to now—'bout one feller mile away, I think it."

CHAPTER III ~ JIMMY AH SAN

Consternation was depicted on the faces of the men. And they all began to question Jacky at once, until Grainger appeared, and then the black boy gave them farther particulars—the Chinamen, he said, were all on foot, each man carrying two baskets on a stick, but there were also five or six pack-horses loaded with picks, shovels, dishes, and other mining gear.

"Curse the dirty, yaller-hided swine!" cried Dick Scott, turning excitedly to Grainger. "What's to be done? They've come to rush the Flat again; but, by thunder! I'll be a stiff 'un afore a Chow fills another dish with wash-dirt on Connolly's Creek."

"And me, too!" "And me, too!" growled the others angrily, and Grainger, as he looked at their set, determined faces, knew they would soon be beyond control, and bloodshed would follow if the advancing Chinamen tried to come on to the field. But, nevertheless, he was thoroughly in sympathy with them. The advent of these Chinese—probably but an advance guard of many hundreds—would simply mean ruination to himself and his mates, just as their prospects were so bright. The men looked upon him as their leader, and he must act—and act quickly.

"Let them come along, boys. Then we'll bail them up as soon as they come abreast of us, and have a little 'talkee, talkee' with them. But for heaven's sake try and keep cool, and I daresay when they see we look ugly at them, they'll trot on. How many of you

have guns of any kind?"

Four rifles and two shot guns were quickly produced, and then every one waited till the first of the Chinese appeared, marching one behind the other. The foremost man was dressed in European clothes, and the moment Scott saw him, he exclaimed—

"Why, it's Jimmy Ah San! I used to know him at Gympie in the old times. He's not a bad sort of a Chow. Come on, boys!"

Grainger, who was not just then well enough to go with them, but remained in his seat with his revolver on his knee, could not help smiling at the sudden halt and terrified looks of the Chinese, when Scott and the others drew up in front of them with their weapons at the present. Half of them at once dropped their baskets and darted off into the bush, the rest crowding together like a flock of terrified sheep. The leader, however, came steadily on. Scott stepped out and met him.

"Good-morning. What do you and all your crowd want here?"

"Nothing," replied the Chinaman quietly, in excellent English, "nothing but to get down to the creek and camp for a few days. But why do you all come out with guns? We cannot do you any harm."

"Just so. But we can do *you* a lot if you try on any games, Mr. Jimmy Ah San."

"Ah, you know me then," said the man, looking keenly at Scott.

"Yes, I do, an' you're all right enough. But me an' my mates is going to keep this field for white men—it ain't goin' to be no

Chinaman's digging'. So what's yer move?"

"Only what I said. Look at my men! We do not want to stop here; we wish to push along to the coast. Some of them are dying from exhaustion, and my pack-horses can hardly go another quarter of a mile."

Soott scratched his chin meditatively, and then consulted with his mates. He, although so rough in his speech, was not a bad-natured man, and he could see that the Chinese were thoroughly done up, and worn down to skin and bone. Then presently Grainger walked over and joined them, and heard what Ah San had to say.

"I'm sorry that you are in such a bad fix," he said, "but you know as well as I do that if any of your men put a pick into ground here, there will be serious trouble, and if they lose their lives you will be responsible—and may perhaps lose your own."

"I promise you that nothing like that will happen," replied the Chinaman. "My men are all diggers, it is true, but we will not attempt to stay on any field where we are not wanted. My name is James Ah San. I am a British subject, and have lived in Australia for twenty-five years. That man" (pointing to Scott) "knows me, and can tell you that 'Jimmy Ah San' never broke a promise to any man."

"That is right enough," said Scott promptly; "every one in Gympie knew you when you was storekeepin' there, and said you was a good sort."

"We have come over three hundred miles from the

Cloncurry," went on the Chinese leader, quickly seeing that Scott's remark had much impressed the other miners; "the diggers there gave us forty-eight hours to clear out. The blacks killed fifteen of us and speared ten of my horses, and six more men died on the way. We can do no harm here. We only want to spell a week, or two weeks."

"Poor devils!" muttered Grainger; then he said to Ah San: "Very well. Now, you see the track going through that clump of sandalwood? Well, follow it and you'll come to a little ironstone ridge, where you'll find a good camping-ground just over a big pool in the creek. There's a bit of sweet grass, too, for your horses, so they can get a good feed to-night. In the morning this black boy will, if you like, show you a place in the ranges, about four miles from here, where you can let them run for a week. There's some fine grass and plenty of water, and they ought to pick up very quickly. But you will have to keep some one to see that they don't get round the other side of the range—through one of the gaps; if they do, you'll lose them to a dead certainty, for there are two or three mobs of brumbies[2] running there. Do you want any tucker?"[3]

"No, thank you," replied Ah San, with an unmistakable inflexion of gratitude in his voice; "we have plenty of rice and tea, but I should like to buy a bullock to-morrow, if I can—I saw some cattle about two miles from here. Is there a cattle station

[2] Wild horses.

[3] Provisions.

near here?"

"No. The cattle you saw belong to one of us—this man here," pointing to Jansen, "will sell you a beast to-morrow, I daresay."

Then the armed protectors of the integrity from foreign invasion of the rights of Chinkie's Flat nodded "Good evening" to Ah San, and walked back across the road to the "Digger's Best," and the Chinamen, with silent, childlike patience, resumed their loads and trotted along after their leader. They disappeared over the hill, and ere darkness descended the glare of their camp fires was casting steady gleams of light upon the dark waters of the still pool beneath the ridge.

CHAPTER IV ~ GRAINGER AND JIMMY AH SAN TALK TOGETHER

It was eight o'clock in the morning, and Jimmy Ah San, a fat, pleasant-faced Chinaman, dressed in European costume, came outside his tent, and filling his pipe, sat down on the ground, and with his hands clasped on his knees, saw six of the white men emerge from two or three humpies, and walk down to the new shaft to begin work.

He was well acquainted with the previous history of the spot upon which he was now gazing, and something like a scowl darkened his good-humoured face as he looked upon the ragged, half-famished surrivors of his company, and thought of the past horrors and hardships of the fearful journey from the Cloncurty. Fifteen of their number had been murdered by blacks in less than a fortnight, and the bones of half a dozen more, who had succumbed to exhaustion or thirst lay bleaching on a strip of desert country between the Cloncurry and the Burdekin River.

But Ah San was a man of courage—and resource as well—and his five-and-twenty years' experience of bush and mining life in the Far North of Australia enabled him to pilot the remainder of his men by forced marches to the Cape River, where they had spelled for a month so as to gain strength for the long stage between that river and Conolly's Creek, on one of the

deserted fields of which he hoped to settle and retrieve his broken fortunes.

As he sat and watched and thought, eight or ten members of his company came and crouched near him, gazing with hungry eyes at the heaps of mullock and the mounds of tailings surrounding the "Ever Victorious" battery, watching the Europeans at work, and wondering when they, too, would give it up and follow their departed comrades. For the Chinamen knew that those dry and dusty heaps of mullock and grey and yellow sand, on which the death adder and the black-necked tiger snake now coiled themselves to sleep in the noon-day sun, still contained gold enough to reward patient industry—industry of which the foreign-devils were not capable when the result would be but five pennyweights a day, washed out in the hot waters of the creek under a sky of brass, "with flour at two-pounds-ten per 50 lb. bag," as Dick Scott said.

Presently, turning to a sun-baked, lanky Chinaman near him —his lieutenant—he bade him tell the men to prepare to go down to the Creek, and drag some of the pools with a small seine.

"There are many fish in all these creeks which run into the great river" (the Burdekin), "but I will first go to the foreigners and ask their permission. The tall, sick man is well disposed towards us, and we must be patient and submit to the tyranny of the others for a little while. But all may yet be well with us if I can but get speech of him alone. Meanwhile, keep the company under close watch; let no man wander from the camp till I return."

Then entering his tent, he took from a canvas pack-bag a small bottle, put it in his coat pocket, and, descending the ridge, walked towards the "Digger's Best."

As he drew near, Grainger, followed by the landlord, came out of the house and sat down on rudely made reclining chairs, composed of two pieces of sapling, with cross-pieces, from which was slung a flour sack.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said the Chinaman politely.

"Good morning," they replied civilly, and then Grainger, who was wearing a heavy overcoat, for the chill of an attack of ague was near, asked him to sit down and inquired how his men were.

"They are getting on very well, thank you, sir," replied Ah San, "but several of them are very weak, and will not be fit to travel for a fortnight unless we carry them. But the rest will do them much good, especially if they get a change of food. I have come now to ask you if you and your mates will let us drag some of the pools in the creek for fish. We have a small net."

"Certainly," replied Jansen; "some fish will do them good, and the pools are alive with them now that the creek is so low. And anyway, we don't want to stop you from getting food—do we, Mr. Grainger?"

"Certainly not; we have no earthly right to prevent you from taking fish in the creek, and even if we had we should not use it. We are not brutes."

"Thank you very much," said Ah San—and then, addressing himself to the landlord, he asked him if he had a bullock to sell.

Jansen was an alert business man at once. He had a small herd of cattle running wild about the creek! and was only too glad to sell a beast.

"You can have any bullock you like—the biggest in the lot—for a fiver—but, cash down."

The Chinaman pulled out his purse, handed him a five-pound note, and asked when he could have the beast.

"In about an hour, if you want to kill right off; but you ought not to kill till sundown in such weather as this. But, anyway, I'll saddle up and get a man to help me run the mob into the stockyard. Then you can pick one out for yourself–there's half a dozen bullocks, and some fine young fat cows, so you can have your choice."

In a few minutes the landlord had caught and saddled two horses, and riding one, and leading the other, he went off to the new shaft, where the spare horse was mounted by one of the men working there.

Then Ah San turned to the sick man, and said interrogatively —

"You have fever?"

"Yes, I caught it up Normanton way in the Gulf Country six months ago, and thought I was getting clear of it, but a month back it came on again, and I have been pretty bad ever since."

"I can see that, and the Gulf kind of fever is bad—very bad. I know all about it, for I lived in the Gulf Country for ten years, and have had it myself. Now, here is some medicine which will

do you good—it will cure you in ten days if you take a dose every time you feel the 'shakes' coming on. But you must not eat more than you can help."

"Thank you," said Grainger eagerly, as he took the bottle; "it is very kind of you. But you may want it yourself?"

"I have three or four more bottles left. I had a dozen from the doctor at Georgetown on the Etheridge River. He is a man who knows all about fever, and I can assure you that you will be a well man in ten days. Show me your hand, please."

The European extended his hand languidly to the Chinaman, who looked at the finger-nails for a moment or two: "You will have the 'shakes' in a few hours."

"Yes. They generally come on as soon as the sun gets pretty high—about nine or ten o'clock."

"Then you must take a dose now. Can I go inside and get a glass and some water?"

"Yes, certainly. It is very good of you to take so much trouble."

Returning with a glass and some water, the Chinaman poured out a dose of the mixture, and with a smile of satisfaction watched the sick man drink it.

Then Grainger and his visitor began to talk, at first on general matters such as the condition of the country between the Cloncurry and the Burdekin, and then about Chinkie's Flat, its past glories and its present condition. The frank, candid manner of Ah San evoked a similar freedom of speech from the Englishman, who recognised that he was talking to an

intelligent and astute man who knew more about the Far North of Queensland and its gold-fields than he did himself.

Then Ah San saw the opportunity for which he had been waiting, and drawing his seat nearer to Grainger's he spoke earnestly to him, told him exactly of the situation of himself and his company, and ended up by making him a certain proposition regarding the working of the abandoned claims, and the restarting of the rusting and weather-worn "Ever Victorious" battery.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.