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Chinkie's Flat 1904

Louis Becke

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CHINKIE'S FLAT AND OTHER STORIES

By Louis Becke

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TO MY DEAR OLD COMRADES North Queensland. De-
cember, 1908

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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 Tamaroora 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 soothing 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 for 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.{*} I daresay I can get all that we want there in the way of machinery without my going or sending to Brisbane for it."

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

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 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 Gypmie 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."