

A GOOD CHRISTIAN GIRL¹

John Biggs

Robert Ah Foy's feet never troubled him, although they carried him to Derby and back every weekend. It was a good seventeen miles by the main road, but Robert took the shorter if more rugged route by Main Creek and back of the Cascade mine. It still took a strenuous ten hours through the thick Tasmanian bush. And this was after a hard day's graft in the Sek Lung tin mine at Emu Flat, just outside Thomas Plains, where he worked with his fellow Chinese.

The reason for the healthy state of Robert's feet was thus. Before he set out, Robert went to the bar of the All Nations Hotel at Thomas Plains and, although a teetotaller, he ordered two double whiskies. He took off his boots and poured a whisky into each boot before replacing it. He wore two pairs of woollen socks that soaked up the whisky just right. By the time he had walked through the bush to Derby, he had the happiest and sweetest smelling feet in the whole of Tasmania's North-East.

The regulars at the All Nations bar watched this strange ritual with the same amused contempt each time. 'A waste of a decent drop, if you ask me. Trust a fuckin' Celestial,' Harry was wont to snort.

'He reckons 'e gets the benefit of the grog through 'is feet,' Joe cackled to his neighbour.

'Remember your mates to the missus!' Fred called, a sally that produced louder guffaws than the others.

If Robert understood their chiacking he never let on. In fact, he did understand their words, if not the barbs with which some words were tipped, because his wife, to whom he trekked so diligently to visit, spoke little or no Chinese. He had learned more English than most of his compatriots. But he was an equable man, certainly not one to seek offence in what was presented as good-humoured teasing.

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Robert had an unusual marriage arrangement. His wife Lucy insisted on living in Derby with her mother, never mind that he himself worked at the Sek Lung mine in Emu Flat. He had met mother and daughter at the Branhholm Races, a sport in which all three shared a strong passion. Each Saturday race meeting, the young Chinaman had noticed these two women, clearly mother and daughter, enthusiastically placing bets and urging their chosen nags on with much shrieking and laughter. Robert was a shy, gentle man, not one to start a conversation with a young woman, let alone one to whom he found himself increasingly attracted. She was a dark-eyed beauty, her full figure at its voluptuous best, the hint that it would in time be as over-blown as her mother's had not yet been dropped. So all Robert did, when he regularly met this girl who made his stomach surge and his heart pound like the Anchor mine's stamp battery, was to smile quickly then look away.

One afternoon, he glanced up to see her looking at him, eyebrows raised, her full lips curved in a smile. To his amazement, she walked over to him. 'Well, who'd you put ya shirt on for the next race, eh?'

'M-my shirt?' was all Robert could stammer.

'Who's goin' to win the next race then, silly?' Lucy tossed her head back, looking him in the eye, her hands provocatively on her hips.

Robert was about to back Star of Peace because he recognised it as the name of a tin mine in Thomas Plains. 'S-star of Peace, he w-win good and proper,' Robert stammered in his embarrassment.

As Star of Peace flashed past the finishing post, indeed leading handsomely, Lucy shrieked with joy and kissed Robert. 'Well, Mr. Chinaman, after that you must come home for tea with me and me mum to celebrate, you must.'

And so Lucy and her mother for their evening meal. After tea, she took him to her bedroom. After his searing moment of ecstasy, and still glowing with joy and love, he turned to the large dark eyes that were watching him.

'Lucy, you marry me, ah?'

Lucy had been observing Robert at the races just as he had been observing her. He was a good looking cove for a Chinaman, well built and all, looking like he'd be hung like a horse, unlike most so they said. His shyness, his quiet ways, only added to his other attractions. One of which was his skill in picking winners.

She also liked her life here in Derby with her mum. She didn't want Robert to live in Derby with them. European women—of whom Lucy half-correctly considered herself to be one—who took Chinese husbands dropped several rungs on Derby's social ladder. This was the same climate that prevented Robert from being employed at the Briseis Mine in Derby, which as the richest mine in the North-East was run by whites for whites. The Celestials were welcome in Derby to cultivate market gardens or to do menial work, but not to mine tin. They could scratch out that existence anywhere else in the region and good luck to them. Which they did with great success, in the alluvial river flats throughout the region—but it took the sort of hard work that the whites themselves were unwilling to invest.

Now, Lucy thought to herself, hadn't Robert said he was able to fill and sell around two, sometimes three bags, a week of good tin ore most of the year, less in summer? At two quid a bag that was a tidy sum, even allowing for some enthusiastic exaggeration on Robert's part.

She turned to the young man lying beside her. She placed her arm alongside his, stroking his skin, so firm and smooth to the touch, then hers.

'See, your skin and mine are a bit alike, ain't they? Allowin' you're a man and work outdoors. Maybe that's 'cause me dad was a Chinaman too, although mum tells everyone he was an Eytalian. Left me and mum in the lurch he did, when I was a little tacker. Proper bastard he was, from all accounts, not like you.'

She laid a finger on his cheek, placing his face in exact alignment with her own, locking him eye-to-eye.

'Yes, I love you too, Robert, but I can't leave me poor mum. She raised me all on her own, she did, and now it's my turn. She needs me to look after her.'

Lucy was relieved that Robert showed no sign that he might have thought this a little strange. He might well have, for Flora, Lucy's mum, seemed to need

little looking after, being hale and hearty and not yet forty. He drew breath to say something but she silenced him by placing her face flat on his, her eyes staring into his eyes. Those too were not unlike her own eyes, she thought, when you got close like this and didn't see the corners.

She drew back, smiling her teasy smile. 'And anyway there ain't no decent jobs here in Derby, not for Chinamen there ain't, if you don't mind me saying so. But it sounds like you've got a jeweller's shop there at Emu Flat. It's best if we're honest with each other, don't you reckon? Well then, I have an idea.'

Robert blinked, shaking his head. 'You have idea?'

'Yes. I'll marry you in Emu Flat. Say Saturday fortnight, there's no races that day. We'll do it your way. Lots of crackers and tin-kettle eh? Then a posh dinner at the new Thomas Plains pub, the All Nations, ain't it? We'll have our own room and that's where we... er... consummate our marriage. Then I come back to Derby on the Sunday coach.'

'C-c-con—what ah?'

'Fuck, dearie. We'll fuck, like we just did.'

'Ah,' Robert's face lit up like the sky on fireworks night. 'Good, good.'

'I'll have to stay here with mum but you could come to Derby every weekend, right? You bring, let's say, two quid each time. If you can that is. Less in the dry season. That leave you enough to live on? You savvy?' She paused to check that Robert was understanding her. He nodded, he understood. 'Goodo, then. That means I can look after me mum good and proper like she deserves.'

She saw a very happy man leave that evening. Smiling to herself, she watched him dance down the street. At the intersection with Cascade Road, he leapt into the air, his right arm punching the sky as he shouted 'Lucy! *haiyaaa!*' to the stars that dwelt up there. Every few minutes, she heard her name being called, softer and softer, until 'Lucy' sank under the sea of sounds made by the Tasmanian bush at night.

Next morning, Flora seemed more than a little unhappy on hearing the glad tidings that another Chinaman was about to enter her life.

‘Lucy! How could you? A girl’s place is with her mum. Yours is, anyway. And a *Celestial!*’

‘But Mum, just think! Nothin’ changes. We’ll do what we always do during the week, and at weekends we have Robert and we’ll all three go to the races like we always do. Nothin’s different! Except we’re two quid a week better off, give or take, and I got an ’usband, which is useful in case something goes wrong. Anyway, I *like* Robert. He’s sweet and he’s funny and he’s gentle in bed and he’s clean. Which is more than you can say about the fuckin’ grafters around here.’

‘Well, some an apple like and some an onion, I suppose,’ Flora sniffed. ‘But hang on, you’ll be a married woman! What about them vows and things, like forsaking all others?’

‘We’re getting married in Emu Flat, where all the Chinamen live. It’ll all be in that ’eathen yabber which don’t mean nothin’ to a good Christian girl like me. What the ear doesn’t ’ear the eye doesn’t see, Mum. You’re always saying things like that.’

Every Friday night, Robert set out for Derby with heart and feet glowing with happiness. He arrived early Saturday morning, to find Lucy lying in bed, warm and receptive, waiting for his impassioned tenderness.

Their love-making concluded, she arose, dressed, cooked his breakfast of eggs, bacon and beggars-in-the-pan, and took it to him on a tray. While he was eating, she hid one of the two pounds he’d just given her in the tin marked ‘Treacle’ on the top shelf. She went up the street to do some shopping with the other pound, while he caught up with some hard earned sleep.

On returning, she harnessed Toby the horse to the dog-trap and off they went to the races, the contents of the treacle tin in her frilly purse.

Robert was a very happy man. Originally, like most of his countrymen, he’d intended to make a hundred pounds or so and then return to his family in

China. But now Lucy's belly was beginning to swell, his heart sang with the knowledge that his real family was in China no longer but here in Tasmania. Sek Lung mine was yielding well, he certainly had no intention of giving that up to go market gardening in Derby, so the future looked bright. The only fly in the ointment was Flora.

Flora had no intention of leaving Derby—that had been made very clear to him—and mother and daughter seemed inseparable. Yet when she was with Robert, Lucy was so warm and so passionate. He was sure she could be persuaded to see where her primary loyalties lay after the birth of their child. Flora also made no bones about the fact that she was unhappy about having a Chinese son-in-law. She joined the two love birds for Saturday tea and Sunday dinner. Her snide little asides cut him.

'Did you buy these spuds from the Chinkie down by the river, love? Got to watch them, you know. They'll diddle you soon as look at you.'

'Now, Mum,' Lucy rolled her lovely eyes towards Robert who sat there quietly eating.

'No, don't get me wrong, love. I don't have nothing against Chinks, *such*. They're people same as us. It's mixed *marriages* I don't hold with, nothing against you two of course. But as a *rule*, like should marry like, that's what I always say. Now don't take that *personal*, Robert. Fact is I quite like you. But not *everyone's* as broadminded as I am.'

Robert was too much in control of himself to let such crude inanities spoil his essential happiness. Lucy liked her mother's sniping this as much as he did, he could see, so he thought his stupid mother-in-law was only digging her own grave.

The spring rains of 1888 lasted longer than usual, so the miners at Sek Lung had much more water than usual for sluicing. Usually operations slowed down by late October, then followed the dry hot summer when the streams slowed to a trickle. During the dry, they took to cutting wood, clearing scrub, tending their gardens, in preparation for the cold, wet winter when mining took off again. But this

season the money-making lasted longer. In one week, Robert made £8. This was phenomenal. He decided to take Thursday and Friday off. He would visit Lucy and give her a double surprise: him and a £5 bonus. They would make love for two whole extra days and plan their future, theirs and their child's.

He arrived at the house in Cascade Road well after dark. He was surprised to hear male voices talking loudly. A group of men were standing around on the front verandah, chatting, laughing and smoking.

Visitors! He yearned just to see Lucy. It was bad enough having to put up with Flora, but with these people he didn't even know, he was very disappointed. He would wait for them to depart.

He walked up the back paddock to talk to Toby while he waited. It was in fact quite pleasant up there, smelling the night smells of the bush, the bright moon shining on the roof of the house below. He could hear Lucy's loud laugh from time to time, often with harsh male laughter, as if they were sharing a joke. One by one, the men drifted off, the house became quieter. At last.

Leaving Toby in the gentle night's tender care, he walked down the paddock to the side of house to enter by the front door, as he usually did. Passing Lucy's window, a throaty male grunt, followed by Lucy's giggle, stopped him dead.

His brain sparked a lightning bolt that shattered the pit-face of his memory. The teasing of the Friday night drinkers, the living arrangement he had with Lucy, leaving her in Derby, her mother's the snide comments formed those shards of memory into one inevitable picture.

He peered through her window, seeing what that lightning flash had just reconstructed. She was on her back, her large dark nipples floating on the puddles formed by her generous breasts. At the dense black parting of her legs, a man with his trousers around his ankles was in the very act of withdrawing, his shaft glistening in the lamplight. Above that parting, beneath the creamy dome formed by her fecund stomach, a child lay curled in prenatal sleep. Was it his child? It could have been anybody's.

Robert took a deep breath. He fell on his knees, concentrating. To anyone watching, he would have looked like a Christian praying. After a while, he stood

up and walked to the bushes by the open front door. He would wait until the man had left.

He didn't have to wait long.

The man came to the door. 'Ooroo, luv. See ya next week,' he shouted as he pulled the door to. He walked down the path whistling.

He had left the door unlatched. Robert entered, going straight to the kitchen, to the top drawer of the old wooden dresser.

The carving knife with the bone handle, the knife he himself had only sharpened last Sunday, was where he'd last put it.

Gliding silently down the hallway, he passed Flora's room. He heard her snoring. Peeping in, he saw her flat on her back, mouth agape, fast asleep. He wrinkled his nose at the dank smell of sweat and sex. So she was at it too. His ears recalled her jibes and insults and muttered them to brain. His hand tightened on the bone handle of the knife... but no. He would let her stew.

Stepping back into the corridor, he continued to Lucy's room. A narrow slit of light under the door told him her lamp was still burning. He opened the door carefully. The smell of sex was ranker here. She was sitting up in bed, still naked, her head down, as she wiped between her thighs with a small cloth. Beside the bed was a bowl containing silver coins and a gold sovereign. The sight and smell whirled his simmering rage into a wild bushfire.

She looked up suddenly to see Robert standing a yard away, his face frozen into a demon's mask. She stammered only the first guttural consonant of his name. '*Rh...Rh...*'

He held up his left hand. In it were five one pound notes spread fanwise.

'*Whore!*' he hissed, pushing her down on her back. '*Gai!*' he repeated in Cantonese each time as he forced a note into her mouth. She gagged convulsively at each thrust of the thick, dry paper.

His left arm under her throat, he threw her back downwards onto the bed. With his right hand clutching the knife in a forward thrust, his thumb aligned with the blade, his forefinger guiding the razor-sharp point to the right space between her ribs, he slammed the knife into her heart.

With a quick twist, he slid it out cleanly to a spray of blood. He sat up while he positioned her right hand. He folded her fingers around the handle, adjusting the angle of the upright blade. He carefully lowered his body until he felt the sharp prick of the blade in line with his own heart.

She had killed him once already that night, and now the world would see that she had.

‘*Gai!*’ he shrieked again.

And fell.