

Ghaskti

by tom mathew



Thud. Thud. Thud. Boom. Bang. Thud. Loud noises of a trunk dropping onto the planks of the pier. Absolutely freezing. No one notices, except shipborne rats, four men carrying a large steamer trunk across the dark pier. The unclaimed luggage came off a jute frigate from Macau.

Galveston sleeps under the frigid moonlight of a Texas March. Close to 40 degrees this morning. Nothing in Cork or Boston. It is dark and cold this early morning. Around the shipyard, various vermin were scampering around. Some chased by stray cats. Others chased by species of rodents much more feral than a ship rat.

Looking out into the horizon, you could not believe the Gulf of Mexico was just a few hundred yards away. You can hear the coyotes howl into the night. Some are looking for a mate. Some looking for food. Others new to the latitude are looking for their way. Way above in the dark sky, buzzards patrol looking for carrion.

"Pick up your side, Johanssen," yelled Rufus.

"Pick it up, you stupid Swede," screamed Jackson. The box had fallen onto the foot of Buford, a stevedore with a kind disposition. Quickly all four men picked the trunk up. The motley crew took the trunk up to a wagon and placed it onto the wooden bed.

Buford yelled out that there would be five shares. "One for each of us. Except I get two shares as there is a founder's fee," he exclaimed.

"Founder's fee?" asked Johanssen.

"You got that right!" bellowed Buford. I am the one who found it in unclaimed luggage. 'n' I am the one who secured it. And soon as we get to the stockyard, we'll open it up and divvy up what is in it."

"OK," replied Rufus and Johanssen simultaneously.

"Alright," answered Jackson.

No one was around when they got to Heidelberg's stockyard. Johanssen stopped the wagon and tied the mules' reins together. All four of them dragged the trunk off of the wagon. Rufus grabbed an iron pick off the wagon and broke the latches off of the trunk. Buford bent over the trunk and pulled the top up.

Jackson quickly looked at the bundle inside. "What the..."

"Oh my...", Buford exclaimed.

"Oh, no!" yelled Johanssen.

"Oh my God!" Rufus replied.

Inside the box was a small Chinese man with iron chains at his feet. Alongside him were what looked like forty bricks. He was covered in his own filth, having been in the trunk for nearly seven days.

Buford pulled the man out the trunk by his arms. As he raised him up, the man swiftly kicked him in the solar plexus. Down went Buford. He then did a quick roundhouse kick to the face of Rufus. Out came a wad of tobacco onto the faces of Johannsen and Jackson.

Jackson took the pick handle and quickly hit the small man in the back of his head.

"Timber," chuckled Johannsen as the little man fell straight into the trunk.

"Lights out", yelled Jackson. "He will not be getting up for a few days."

"Looks like the box is full of bricks, piss and shit", Buford said. "There's no money here."

Jackson and Buford went through the man's pockets; there was nothing. Buford got up and just laughed. "Well, there goes that," he exclaimed in frustration.

The three of them emptied the trunk. Johannsen took the small man and threw him into the manure pile.

"Disgusting," stated Rufus. "So sad what society has become."

The warm tongue felt good against his face. He knew he was in heaven. His lips went to meet the lips of such a soft touch and soon he spit up in disgust. Delilah it was not. Just a dairy cow with Heidelberg's mark on its face.

"Yuck," yelled Chen Lee. He looked around. He was in a manure pile in the Heidelberg Stock Yard. He was surrounded by twenty young steers and three dairy cows. He looked at his hands and feet. His butt was almost a foot into a cow manure pile.

"Beautiful," he stated. Chen leaned forward and got up and looked straight into the barrels of large shot gun.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" asked Gustav Heidelberg, the grandfather of the owner, O.J. Simpson Heidelberg.

Mr. Lee mimicked incomprehension. Gustav gave a few more yells and then just gave up. He put the gun to Chen's back and walked him towards a fire bucket. Then they walked to the water pump. Gustav put the rifle down and showed Chen how to operate the pump. It took three buckets of water to remove the filth from his hair.

Gustav came back with a giant bar of soap. The shotgun was back in the house; the only building in the stockyard. "You are covered in manure and it stinks. Wash up!" yelled Gustav.

He walked back to the house. Chen undressed and took the soap and lathered up well.

"Don't worry. Only me in the stockyard," he stated.

Chen washed himself off. Gustav came back with a pair of overalls that were three sizes bigger than what Chen could fit. He appreciated the clothes. Gustav took him to the outhouse. In the outhouse, Chen eliminated some gold which he had swallowed the day before. "That's a relief," he said to himself.

He put them into the small pocket inside his overalls. Chen then rolled up the legs of his overalls so that he could walk in them. Gustav came to talk to Chen Lee. He offered him a delivery job.

"I need someone to take some bones to a factory every day," Gustav stated. He added, "You have to take the mules two and a half miles from here every day. Then, you have to come back. The pay is \$3 per week."

Chen smiled and nodded his head. He had no idea what Gustav was saying. Gustav added, "I'll show you." Chen looked at him quizzically. Gustav grabbed Chen's hand and led him to a wagon. The two of them went to the stable and found two mules, led them back to the wagon and put tack and bridles on the animals. Gustav showed Chen the hand brake for the wagon.

Chen was slightly afraid of the mules. "Show them you are the boss," said Gustav. He took a whip in his hand and mimicked how to coax the mules. Chen repeated the gesture. The two of them pulled the mules toward the store room at the edge of the abattoir. There was a pile of bones there. He showed Chen how to load the bones onto the wagon and Chen repeated the steps. Soon the wagon was loaded with about four hundred pounds of cattle bones.

Gustav asked Chen to whip the mules. Although much smaller than Gustav, Chen picked up the horse whip and just snapped it hard against the mule's rear. The animal snorted and started to pull. "Anybody can do it," laughed Gustav.

It took about an hour to get to the factory. Chen pulled on the reins. Then he slowly set the hand brake. There Chen and Gustav unloaded the bones. The receivables clerk gave Gustav some money. Gustav thanked him. Chen and he then left for the slaughterhouse after that.

When they got back to the stock yard, Gustav directed Chen to the bone pile. Chen loaded up the wagon. And he headed back down to the factory by himself. By the end

of the day, Chen had made a total of three deliveries. In just one day, he had ended his life as a stowaway and started a whole new career in America as a stevedore.

That night he slept on the floor of the big house on the stockyard. When he awoke, Gustav introduced him to Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a deaf mute, but built like a clydesdale.

Ezekiel and Chen loaded up the wagon and drove out to the factory. They did two more trips that day. At the end of the day, Ezekiel took Chen to Liz's Boarding House. There Liz showed him around and told him a room would cost \$5 a month. Chen just smiled. He had no idea what anyone was talking about.

It went on like this. Chen would load up the wagon. Ezekiel would then load up the wagon. Chen did not talk much and Ezekiel appreciated that. Except for a few grunts and heavy breathing, Ezekiel did not talk at all. At the end of each week, Gustav would give him \$3.

One Friday, Ezekiel grabbed Chen and took him to the saloon. There he had his first sip of ale. After his second sip of ale, Chen had to go vomit. While he was in the back of the saloon throwing up, a bunch of men were talking quietly about a new railroad line going into Tulsa from Helena. They needed a new partner to take the western end of the line. Chen listened carefully.

Suddenly, they noticed him. The men went and grabbed Chen and started roughhousing him. He did not know what to do. In the blink of an eye, Ezekiel came into the back of the saloon. He landed a huge fist into one man's face and knocked him out cold. His head fell hard onto the stone tiled floor. The rest were too awestruck to react.

Ezekiel quickly grabbed Chen and threw him over his shoulder. He ran quickly through the saloon and put Chen onto their wagon and rode away. Fast. The mules pulled them back to Liz's Boarding House.

“Liz, I need a map,” demanded Chen Lee from the innkeeper Liz.

“Hold your horses,” and she went out to the kitchen and found a map that was framed on the wall.

“Where you heading to, sugar?” she asked.

“Where is Tulsa?” he asked. Ezekiel looked on as the two chatted.

“I don’t need a map to tell you that. Tulsa is in Indian Territory. Up North and then east,” she stated.

“Where is Helena?” he asked her.

“I think it’s east of Tulsa. Maybe further south but definitely east,” she stated. “Better look at the map.”

She looked at the map and saw Helena and pointed it out to Chen Lee and Ezekiel.

“Travelin’?” she enquired.

“Nah, just askin’,” Chen answered. “Good night Liz,” he said as he retired for the night.

“Good night, Chen. Good night, Ezekiel,” replied Liz to the two men as they went up the stairs to their rooms.

The next day Gustav and his grandson O.J. Simpson, brought Steven Simpson to meet Chen. Steven used to be a missionary in China and spoke fluent Cantonese. He asked Chen his name. Chen stated his name to him.

Steven turned to his father and told him “Chen Lee is his name.”

Gustav and Steven asked Chen to accompany them to a business trip they had to make to Abilene. A cattlemen’s convention was going on. He would be their personal valet during the trip. His job was to carry their bags and get them food and dry goods from the local stores. Chen agreed enthusiastically to their request.

Abilene was a boom town. Cattlemen from all over Texas and several states came to the convention. They checked into a fancy hotel. And, in the evening, they took Chen to a fancy restaurant with a can-can show. And that is where Chen met Penny, his future wife.

Penny was from Macau. She spoke fluent Cantonese as well as English. More importantly she danced in the show and also played slapstick comedy routines. And the two of them talked. She spoke in Cantonese and Chen was enthused as he had not

heard his language in years. Except when he talked to himself in his dreams. He asked Penny if she was interested in a business proposition. She was intrigued.

He told her what he had heard. She smiled and told him that they needed to talk to an attorney, form a corporation and then try to buy up some land.

“Well. How are we going to do this?” he asked her.

“You need to tell your boss you need to leave,” she said.

“What am I going to say?” he asked incredulously.

“You are going to tell him that we are going to get married and that we are going to move to Indian Territory,” she replied.

Later the next day, he went and told Gustav and Steven. They both replied “Congratulations” and wished him the very best of everything.

“Where to now, my Queen?” he asked.

Penny replied, “Tulsa!”

Tulsa was booming. Americans from fifteen states and over thirty nationalities had moved to Tulsa to take advantage of a massive cattle boom. Everyone was trying to make money. And boom times were here.

Chen and his wife Penny found a temporary apartment to live in and started making the rounds of real estate agents to find land and a home. Then they looked for an attorney. That day found them in the office of Ulysses Veritas, educated at Yale University. US Army alumnus from the state of Virginia and thriving practice in the Black Wall Street of Tulsa.

They paid him \$5,000 for retainer to be their counsel. Penny Lee, former saloon girl and hot shot dancer and can-can skit participant learned a lot of high English from all those Yankee salesmen she met in those Abilene bars. And here quietly she directed her husband via her fluent and razor sharp Cantonese what to say to such a sophisticated attorney.

They told Ulysses of a railroad coming in. Ulysses listened and cautioned them on land speculation. Railroads were big news in town and also source of major consternation. Big talk but no real action. He told them to come back in a few days and he would draw up what was called a land option contract.

Chen agreed and he and Penny went back to their apartment.

A few days later, they went back to Black Wall Street as what the local cattlemen called that part of town and Ulysses Veritas sat down and explained the contract to them.

He told them to be careful as speculation was rife in the town and as soon as people find out they are buying land, you will get priced out completely. He told them to buy land from down and out farmers and to get them to sign a land option contract as opposed to a sale contract.

Chen looked confused. Then Ulysses explained to him, “you will have the right to buy the land at a specific price in the future. Let us say his land is worth \$100. So we will buy the right to buy it at \$1,000. He will take your money, say \$50, and you will then have a valid commercial bona fide land option contract. This contract can be good up to 10 years. We will have paid him the consideration which will allow the contract to stand up in court. Most importantly we are buying the land at a much higher price than it is currently worth. So you are not gouging him at all.

Penny understood and explained the concept to Chen in Cantonese. It is like paying a deposit on tuition early. This way we get the set price at a future date. If it goes up, we pay what we agreed to.

She advised him that it was a good deal. When the railroad announces this, the land prices will go much higher. We can actually sell the contracts to the railroad or to other speculators.

Ulysses set up Tulsa Land Acquisition Corp. in the state of Virginia. He then had Penny and Chen form a corporation in the state of Delaware that invested in the Tulsa Land Acquisition Corp. entity. All farmers saw were legal papers and Ulysses’ signatures.

Over the next six months, Chen and Penny bought over \$5,000 of land option contracts which gave them the right to buy almost 1,000 acres of land at a price of \$500 per acre. Many of the farmers were destitute and were not even making their feed bills. Some laughed at the silly contract they were signing. Prime land was less than \$100 per acre. Average land was about \$30 per acre. Even land in the town had not reached \$100 per acre. They thought Ulysses had lost his marbles. The farmers signed the contracts. They needed the cash.

After three years, Penny and Chen noticed that heavy orders were coming in for lumber at the local mill. But they kept their observations to themselves. Then that December, there was notice published in the Helena Free Press, “Charleston South Carolina Railroad to build Helena Tulsa Rail Line”.

“Hallelujah”, yelled Ulysses Veritas into heaven. All of Black Wall Street heard this barrister’s bellicose yelp. He grabbed his coat and hat and yelled out of his third floor, law practice window at the local livery to send over a horse and carriage. And out he went to the edge of Tulsa to Chen’s house to show him the paper from Helena.

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