

The Chinese People Street

Senior Constable Murchison steps off the curb into Wellington's Haining Street, lifting his trousers to avoid the dark stains in the grit, but not far enough to reveal his leg brace.

The Chinaman lies face down, his flat nose planted in the dirt, and his arms palm up as if he has just dropped into his cot after a night in one of the slum's taverns. He isn't sleeping, though, and nor is he drunk. He is, in fact, quite dead, judging from tell-tale entry hole in the middle of his tunic.

"Do we know who it is?"

Constable Thomas checks his notes. "A Chee-Yung Chan," he says, hesitating over the unfamiliar syllables.

Murchison flinches, the movement causing an explosion behind his eyes. A branding iron to his eyeballs. Murchison inhales, a slow breath. Then, using his thumb and forefinger, he pinches away the pain at the bridge of his nose. "And who found him?"

"A brother, I think. That's him over there, with his back to that fence. I asked him to wait." Murchison looks across the street to where several Chinese men have gathered, the morning sun hitting the painted boards of the cottages behind them. They're a ragged, sad-looking lot, most of them retired miners stuck here without the funds to get them back to China. In truth, the constabulary has few troubles with them. Left to themselves, they resolve their own squabbles, but, when they do come to the attention of the police, it usually involves money: gambling debts, unpaid taxes, and misplaced nest-eggs... The witness, younger than the others at around forty, is surprisingly well-dressed though, in a decent enough suit, a peek of shiny buckled braces, and what looks to be a new Homburg hat. The man lowers his eyes to the footpath, avoiding Murchison's gaze.

"Shifty-eyed bugger," Thomas says, noting the man's reaction. "They're a strange lot, the Chinese. Do you know him, Sir?"

Murchison doesn't attempt to nod. He knows him well enough. "Lee Yung is his name, although he goes by Leon. Runs a gambling house further down the street."

"So is he a troublemaker?" Thomas asks. A cart rumbles along the narrow street, the driver craning his neck for a view of the victim. Murchison waits for it to pass before answering.

"About a year ago, we got a tip-off to raid his house for opium. Found nothing. For a Chinaman, I gather he keeps his nose pretty clean. I didn't know he had a brother, though. What time was the death was reported?"

Thomas checks first his notes, and then his fob. “An hour and ten minutes ago. The brother sent a runner the 200 yards to Buckle Street station.”

“Hmm,” Murchison says, pursing his lips.

The constable falls silent. Not so daft, Thomas doesn’t mention that when boy arrived at a quarter after nine, Murchison had yet to arrive at his place of employ. Murchison sniffs. It hadn’t been his finest moment: being roused from his rooms in Berhampore.

“Right then, let’s have a look, shall we?” Bending stiff-legged, Murchison examines the entry wound. Small and neat. He pulls up the man’s tunic for a better look, revealing the victim’s torso. *Advanced livor mortis.*

“You see this purpling of the skin, Thomas? See how gravity has caused the blood to pool near the ground. What does that tell us?”

Stooping first to observe the bruising, Thomas says, “I’d hazard that the Chinaman died face down, Sir. In this position.”

“Anything else?”

A pause. “It’s likely he died right here.”

“Very good, Constable.”

Murchison lifts the man’s arm, flops it about, then replaces it on the roadway. He pulls a handkerchief from his pocket, and shakes out the ironed creases.

“Since there’s no sign of rigor yet, I’d wager our victim died around six to eight hours ago, around 5am,” he says, wiping his hands on the checked fabric. He replaces the handkerchief, unfolded, in his pocket. “Write that down in your notebook, Thomas, and wait with the body until the cart comes to take it to the morgue. I’m going to have a talk with Chan.”

The crowd, skittish as a herd of Southland sheep, scatters as Murchison approaches. Only one or two bolder sorts hover within earshot, feigning disinterest.

“Lee Jung. I’m Senior Constable James Murchison.”

The man nods. “People know me, call me Leon,” he says.

“Leon, I understand the dead man was your brother?”

“Yes. My brother. Second son.”

“And you found his body?”

“I come home, and he is not there. I go out and find him on the road. He is already dead.” Squinting against the sun, Chan glances at his brother.

“What time was this? Dawn?”

“Not dawn, but morning. My brother no come home. I go to look for him.”

“You’re telling me that you went out to look for a grown man?”

“He no come home.”

“Hmm.” Murchison pinches the bridge of his nose. “Do you have a gun?”

“Me, I no have gun. Why I have a gun?”

“Did you kill your brother?”

The Chinaman curls his upper lip.

“There was no quarrel between you?”

Silence.

“He didn’t borrow money he should’ve given back?”

Still Chan doesn’t answer. Instead, he stares at Murchison, his slanted eyes narrowed even further in a look of... indignation? Contempt?

Murchison persists: “Do you have any idea who would want to kill your brother?”

Leon Chan shakes his head. “Why someone want to kill Cheung?” he says quietly. “That one, he good man.” Tears spring into Chan’s eyes. He turns away.

*

Murchison and Thomas are kept busy calling upon the street’s residents: trying to find anyone who might have heard a gun go off in the morning around five, and inspecting local properties for the murder weapon.

The Chinese are deep sleepers. No one had heard the gunshot. A few of the tenants have guns though. Former gold miners, they’d kept guns to ward off thieves from their precious claims. But any that Murchison and Thomas uncover have come out of cupboards smelling of damp and mould. Battered and dusty, none of them carry the faintest whiff of recently fired cordite.

It’s a frustrating day’s work. The majority of the residents don’t speak English, instead looking askance in that sly way the Chinese have, and answering ‘No savvy’ to every other question.

“None of this lot would get in now,” Thomas had quipped and Murchison had agreed that few would pass obligatory reading tests now required by the country’s immigration authorities. They get by with the help of gestures, but by mid-afternoon Murchison is the worse for it: his head throbbing and his leg aching.

So it’s a relief when, in the late afternoon, Doctor Nicholson invites them in and offers them tea.

“If you don’t mind my asking, Doctor, what made you open your rooms here?”

Murchison asks, accepting a porcelain teacup in the doctor’s front room.

“I don’t mind at all. You’re not the first to ask, Constable Murchison. My sister frequently pleads with me to move my rooms to Thorndon, so I will tell you what I tell her: the location is good—it’s very central—and the rent is affordable. I find another advantage is that I can get many of the herbs and medicines I require from nearby suppliers—”

“No offense, Doctor,” Thomas interrupts, “but I agree with your sister. I wouldn’t be keen to live here among the Chinese with their potions and their strange ways. They say if a man stands on the corner of Frederick and Haining long enough, he’ll find himself plucked off the street, pickled in ginger and served up in a roadside kitchen by the start of the next day.”

Doctor Nicholson chuckles at that. “An old wives’ tale, Constable Thomas, I assure you. That story is like the bogey man, meant only to frighten children. I’ve certainly never encountered any trouble. And it hardly seems very likely, since you and your colleague here found a perfectly good body discarded in the street today. If your theory held any credence, that would be a terrible waste, don’t you think?”

Thomas gives the doctor a weak smile, and takes a sip of his tea.

Opposite his constable, Murchison flexes his foot discreetly inside his boot, a trick he uses to stave off the ache. “So, you haven’t heard of any unrest, anything which might have led to the murder of Cheung Chan?” he says.

“You mean, apart from this war, filling the newspapers with propaganda, and our young men with dreams of glory?” The doctor breaks off. “You must forgive me, gentlemen. I have a tendency to get on my soapbox. Another of my faults for which my sister frequently takes me to task. So, to your question, as far as I know, the younger Chan was quiet and well-liked. A hardworking fellow. He works—I beg your pardon, he *worked*— in a laundry a couple of streets away. Has done for some years now, I believe.”

“What of the brother? Can you tell me anything about him?”

“Lee Yung. Ah well, he’s ambitious. I believe he runs a gambling house, and has a penchant for expensive things. It’s odd, but when you said a man named Chan had been murdered, Constable Murchison, I would’ve expected it to be the elder.”

A little later Murchison and Thomas step off the porch and into the street to begin their walk home. Murchison’s leg is killing him. Thomas slows his pace. Murchison is grateful, and yet the gesture rankles. “I reckon the doctor’s a brave one, living here,” says Thomas, who’s still of the opinion that someone local committed the crime, that the Chinese are covering up for one of their own. “Look at it. This street is a pit of vice. Opium, gambling—” He waves his arms in a sweeping gesture, taking in the gambling den opposite, and an adjacent food stall where a man

tends a boiling pot ready for the evening's customers. Alongside, a dog forages in a box of rubbish. "—and now murder!"

"Chan's not the first Chinaman to be murdered in this street either," Murchison says.

"Is that so? Well then, that just goes to prove it."

"Yes, but on that occasion, it wasn't a Chinaman who was convicted of the crime."

"Now you're pulling my leg, Sir!"

"Not at all, Thomas. It was almost a decade ago, so well before your time. I hadn't been in the constabulary long myself. A man by name of Lionel Terry shot a Chinaman almost exactly where we found Chan this very morn."

"What did the Chinaman do to provoke him?"

"Nothing."

"He must have done something, Sir. People don't go around killing without motive. Even if the victim is Chinese."

"That's precisely my point, Thomas. The victim's crime, according to his aggressor, was simply being Chinese." Thomas slows, about to head uphill to his parents' home in Kelburn.

"Are you implying that the two correspond?" he says. "You think Chan's murder took place on Haining Street, simply because it's where the Chinese live?"

"It's a possibility," Murchison says, and he tips his hat to his colleague.

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Murchison steels himself for the painful climb to his room when the door to dining room opens and his landlady, Mrs Lewis, pops her head into the hall.

"Mr Murchison?"

"Yes, Mrs Lewis?" Murchison removes his hat.

"You left without taking your breakfast this morning."

"Yes, I'm very sorry to have put you to the trouble of preparing it, Mrs Lewis. I will pay for the food, of course. I had a rather unsettled night and woke late."

"Yes, about that, I was wondering—"

"I realise it how badly it must look when the police knock on your front door enquiring about your lodgers, ma'am. I apologise for the intrusion. You have my word that it won't happen again."

"Mr Murchison—"

She knows.

Murchison braces himself for what surely must come. He'd done his best to hide his former activities, but she only had to call upon his previous landlord to learn all the lurid details.

Murchison had hoped his police credentials might dissuade her. When the new boarder, Booker, had arrived, a man he'd spied often on Haining Street, Murchison had felt sure she would learn of his affliction. He runs a hand over the smooth surface of the newel post. In spite of the agony of the three flights of stairs, he's been happy here: it'd be a shame to be tossed out now.

"—since you didn't take your breakfast, I thought I'd save you some supper. I've kept it warm in the oven, if you'd like it. I could have it brought up for you? Or you might like to have it here in the dining room, where it's warm." She pushes the door ajar and steps to one side, allowing him to see the fire flickering in the hearth and the embroidered table napkins laid out on the dining table. Murchison feels the day's tension drain from his shoulders.

"Supper would be very nice. Thank you, Mrs Lewis."

*

"I still reckon King Dick had the right of it, Sir," Thomas says the next morning, referring to the country's former Prime Minister. They're at the Buckle Street stationhouse, the red brick barracks still just as rowdy of a morning, never mind that half the population has bugged off to war. "A Chinaman simply doesn't have the moral fortitude of an Englishman, does he?"

"That may be so, Thomas," Murchison replies, "but whatever we may think of the Chinese, as officers of the law we cannot allow sentiment to guide our actions. We must base our investigations on the facts." Although, apart from the cause of death—the bullet hole in the middle of Chan's back—for the moment they have precious few.

"Do we have the bullet up from the morgue yet?" Murchison asks.

Thomas checks their cubby hole.

"It's here, Sir."

"Let's have a look at it, then," says Murchison.

Thomas passes him the bullet. Cleaned of the Chinaman's viscera, Murchison holds the shell between his thumb and forefinger and turns it to the window to examine it: a tapered lead cap on a brass casing.

"You know, it looks too short to be a .303 bullet," Thomas says. "Too squat."

Murchison purses his lips. "So, it hit a bone and got flattened in the body," he surmises.

"I don't think so, Sir. I don't think this bullet was fired from a rifle. I reckon it came from a handgun."

"You know, you could be right."

"It might be a Webley."

"What makes you think that?"

“My brother-in-law was issued with the Mark IV. Lucky bastard is with the Mounted Rifles. He wasn’t supposed to, but he was feeling sorry for me, so before he left, he let me fire it. Amazing. A child could hit a currant bun at 50 yards with one of those. There’s a Mark VI version just come out, and the word is it’s even better... Anyway, the one I fired: it had cartridges that looked like this one.”

Murchison sits heavily in his chair, the bullet closed in his fist. He needs to think about this. Needs to think this through *carefully*. Because if the bullet that killed Chan has been fired by a Webley handgun, then they’re going to have to proceed with caution. The British Webley is a military issue weapon—an officer’s weapon—which makes its owner, and potentially Chan’s murderer, a ranking member of the military.

“Sir? Could it’ve been a Webley confiscated during the drunk and disorderly at the Thistle Inn last week? If it was, the gun could still be down in storage, a bullet in the cylinder. We could compare.”

Murchison shakes his head. “I doubt it’ll still be there. When its owner sobered up, he would have made sure he slunk in and retrieved it.”

“Yes, you’re right, Sir. Although, the murder weapon probably isn’t a Webley at all. Far more likely a Chinaman did it, and we just haven’t found the gun yet.”

*

Where the devil has Thomas got to? They’re in the middle of a murder investigation. They’ve enquiries to make. Irritated, Murchison stalks to the front desk, but the station stenographer, a pretty girl with over-long fingernails, is occupied. Murchison waits, impatiently flexing his foot inside his boot. Her task completed, the stenographer finally lifts her head. “Yes?”

“Miss Kinley. Have you seen Constable Thomas?”

“Well, he was here, but he went out,” she says. Murchison towers over her, but still the girl manages to make him feel small and petty.

“Yes, I can see that. When will he be back?”

“No way to tell, Sir. He’s only gone off to enlist with the New Zealand Expeditionary Forces. Had a hankering to see the Europe, he said.”

Murchison stifles a pang of envy. Another one gone off to do his duty for King and Country, while Murchison rots here at home. He can’t say he’s surprised, the way Prime Minister Massey has been clamouring to help the Home Country. Practically everyone is wearing khaki now. Even the natives are going, with Massey up and ignoring the British policy. And it’s not just the Maori enlisting either: *any* johnny-come-lately can sign up. Dalmatians. Indians. Chinese. The NZEF will take anyone prepared to carry a rifle and make a stand.

Only for that you need two good feet.

Murchison grinds his teeth. Still, he has to concede that Thomas will make a good officer. For a young man, he's got a sound head on his shoulders. Murchison only hopes he doesn't get the ruddy thing blown off.

"Are you all right, Sir?"

"Quite all right, thank you."

"It's just that—"

"Obviously, I'm disappointed to lose a good constable. If you see Thomas, tell him I wish him safe travels, will you?" Forcing a smile, Murchison turns to go, but the stenographer waves a piece of paper at him.

"I almost forgot, there's a memo for you." She hands him the folded sheet. "It's from the superintendent. He says to tell you, with the war on we're short-staffed, and it looks like you'll have to close the Chinaman's case on your own," she says breezily, saving him the bother of reading the note.

Exhaling slowly, Murchison inclines his head. "Thank you, Miss Kinley."

*

Cheung's employer at the laundry, a fat-faced man with his hair lank from standing over the steaming tubs, had confirmed the doctor's testimony. Chan the younger was a good man. A hard worker. Honest. On the night of the murder Cheung Chan had stayed on late to close up the laundry, as he did often.

"Had he quarrelled with anyone?"

The man had shaken his head. "Ask brother," he said.

Another who fancied Leon for the crime. Nicholson had implied the same. Even Thomas suspected he was involved in some way. Murchison begins to wonder if the shooter had killed the wrong brother. Time to speak to Leon again...

After six, when Murchison enters the tavern, the scent of poppy hangs in the air like a dewy morning at the Botanical Gardens. At this hour, the gambling tables are still quiet. Murchison's footsteps echo loudly in his ears, his bad leg slurring over the wooden planks. A Chinaman hurries forward, somehow simultaneously running and bowing obsequiously.

"Welcome, welcome."

Murchison has no time for his fawning. "Is Chan here?"

"Chan Sing Saang not here. Please, I can help you. Today, I am boss."

Murchison can't believe he hadn't realised, but it makes sense. The Chinaman doesn't own the gambling house: the Chinese are not permitted to own property.

“Who owns this place?”

“Mista Loberts, big boss.”

“I’d like to speak with him.”

“Mista Loberts very busy man...” the Chinaman says, his eyes straying to the left.

“Tell him the police are here.”

“Ah, one moment.” The Chinaman scurries away, only to come back minutes later. “This way, this way.” Murchison is led into a back room where smoke hovers like a summer mist. The Chinaman melts away.

Roberts lies on a crumpled couch, a large ruddy man with tiny darkened pupils. Murchison’s heart lurches. He’s seen him before.

“What’s this about, then?” Roberts beckons to a chair. “Am I under arrest?”

Taking the proffered seat, Murchison slows his breathing to get his pulse under control. “Not at all, Sir. Just some help with my enquiries, if you would.”

“Fire away,” Roberts says. He picks up a pair of yellowing mah-jong tiles from an adjacent table.

“I’ve come to ask about Leon Chan.”

Roberts toys absently with tiles. “My overseer? What about him?”

“Were you aware that Chan’s brother was killed yesterday? Shot in the back.”

“Really?” The arched eyebrow doesn’t convince. Roberts isn’t surprised.

“It was a cowardly act.”

Roberts shrugs, unrattled.

Murchison goes on. “There’s speculation that the shooting was a case of mistaken identity.”

“Could be. The Chinese all look the same, don’t they?” Roberts says. He starts juggling the tiles from one hand to the other. When Murchison says nothing, the tavern owner looks up. “Ah, I see. You think the killer was after Leon? Well, that wouldn’t surprise me.”

“So Leon has enemies?”

“Plenty. To tell the truth, I’m not so keen on the son of a bitch myself. He skims my profits, did you know that? How do you think he can afford those dandy clothes of his?”

“He steals from you?”

“Now don’t go jumping to any conclusions, Constable.” Robert gives a cool laugh. “I didn’t kill his brother.”

“You could’ve had someone shoot at the brother, though. To frighten Leon, stop him stealing from you.”

“And why would I do that? This is *Tong Yan Gaa*, the Chinese People Street. If I don’t like one Chinaman, there are plenty of others. No, I turn a blind eye to the theft. Chan’s a good worker and he isn’t greedy. He makes me more money than he takes. We have an understanding.”

The ache behind Murchison’s eyes is back. He massages the bridge of his nose, hoping the rub away the pain. What Roberts says makes sense. The man had no reason to threaten Chan. He had only to let him go.

“What about Chan’s other enemies? You said he had others.”

Roberts drops the tiles on the table—the clatter reverberating in Murchison’s brain.

He gives Murchison a hard look. “Any number of them. He recognises them, you see.”

“Who?”

“I can’t tell you. I don’t make a habit of remembering their names. But Chan does. He knows them all: the respectable gentlemen who come here night after night to bury their sordid little secrets.”

“Any military men?” Murchison interrupts.

“All manner of men. Merchants. Soldiers. Your brother. Your neighbour. Even officers of the law like yourself. Chan knows them all, Constable. He knows all their names.”

*

Murchison struggles against the constant pounding in his skull. Cold, he opens his eyes, blinking, and notes the ceiling panels: the hazy morning light through the curtains revealing the damp stain in the shape of a dragon. So he’s on the floor. But he’s resisted temptation for months. Ever since he’s moved here. Yet, the evidence is hard to refute. He’s prostrate on the floor. His heart sinks. He’s succumbed again to the lure of the brown tar, hasn’t he? He’d been so sure that the last time would be just that. He’d promised himself. Why? What had been the trigger? He was on case—the Chinaman’s murder—and he’d gone to the gambling hall to talk to the elder Chan. Yes, he remembers that: the clatter of the mah-jong tiles and shouts and leers of the men. He can still smell the hanging clouds of smoke carrying the musk of incense and sex. Did he lie down on one of the couches? Take the weight off his feet? Loosen his brace? That insistent pounding! It’s confusing him. Cluttering his thoughts. He screws up his eyes, straining his memory. Did he smoke a pipe? Normally he’d know, but he can’t recall...doesn’t *remember*. The sticky weep bubbling in the pan. The heady smell of flowers. The soft touch of the lacquered pipe on his lips. The blessed relief of that first drag and the sweet melting insouciance it brings...

He tries to rise, but the effort is too much. Panting, sweat trickling down his temple, he falls back. Resolves to stay on the floor. Another moment. Just until he gets his breath. Until his head clears...

The floorboards creak. There's someone in the doorway. His landlady? Murchison lifts his eyes, the effort herculean. But it isn't Mrs Lewis, knocking to see if she could bring Murchison a cup of tea. Instead, it's the dead Chinaman who staggers into the room, grey and hollow-eyed, the hole in his midriff seeping blood and pus. Seeing Murchison, he smiles through blackened teeth.

It can't be.

Murchison blinks, not trusting his eyes. But the Chinaman is still there, smiling as if Murchison is a needle discovered in the crack between the floorboards.

But Chan's dead!

Unquestionably dead. Murchison had seen him there in the morgue, Cheung Chan, his body washed and mottled on the bench. He'd observed as the mortician had sliced deep into the flesh to fold open the torso. Seen him put his hand into the cavity and remove the bullet, dropping it into the steel specimen dish. Clink. Metal on metal: the silver capsule tiny in the kidney-shaped bowl.

The mortician had said: "A single bullet wound to the torso at T4. Death would have occurred instantly or soon thereafter due to perforation of the major organs."

But the floorboards creak again, the low moan making Murchison's hair stand on end.

"You're dead," he whispers as much to himself as to the cadavre.

"You, you open one eye, shut one eye," the Chinaman hisses, lurching forward and grasping at the air. "You kill me yourself."

"No, that's not true. I didn't kill anyone. I'm the investigating officer," Murchison blurts. He fights to get up, but his good leg can find no purchase on the rimu boards. Urgently, he clutches for a handhold. Curse this blasted leg! He struggles, fighting nausea, his mind swimming. The Chinaman is almost upon him. That's when the dragon on the ceiling moves, the damp stain pulling away from its perch and billowing outwards in a menacing curl of dirty yellow smoke. Murchison blinks away tears as the dragon expands, filling the room with stench and heat, until it occupies the entire eastern corner, soaring over the Chinaman, and Murchison himself.

Just smoke. It's just smoke. For a second, Murchison wonders if the house is on fire and is almost relieved by the thought. It's possible he might still be on the water wagon and just overwhelmed by smoke of the fire. The dragon's eyes are surely flames. See how they flash red?

The creature's roars and cackles, aren't they just like a fire? But even as he thinks it, his constable's mind rejects it: a fire would not be cold, and Murchison is deathly cold, the sweat chilling on his skin. Paralysed, he watches in horror as, inexorably, the dragon draws itself up, its maw open in a parade of spiked teeth. Suddenly, it swoops, its lips smacking the floorboards, consuming Chan in a gulp. It turns then to Murchison, curved talons so white they hurt his eyes, and its tail swaying in a self-satisfied flourish like a cat's. The yellow smoke gathers again. Trembling, Murchison tries to shrink into the floorboards.

"What do you want?" he whispers?

*

Murchison waits until the front door closes, signalling Booker's departure, before entering the dining room his hat grasped firmly in both hands.

He clears his throat. "Excuse me, Mrs Lewis, I wonder if I could trouble you to assist me with something?"

Replacing the teapot on its trivet, the widow smiles. "Of course, Mr Murchison. If I can."

"I was wondering..." he breaks off.

Just ask.

"Do you remember earlier this week when I was late rising?"

"Why yes, I do. You missed your breakfast."

"Can you tell me... that is... the night before, would you know if...was I here all night?"

*

Murchison verifies the store-room is empty. Then, holding his breath, he slides the carton from the shelf. Ignoring the sweat beading on his brow, he peers into the cavity.

Please, let it be empty.

But the gun is there, its brass barrel winking at him in the gloom.

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