

Book II

Breath of the Dragon

“In truth I can say life proves hospitable to only two kinds of beings; those who suspect that it is a bet lost from the beginning and those who think it a negotiation, continuing on. My one purpose has been to convince those who think life is only a game that death can be a game too, our only victory rising above the sense of overwhelming despair that results from the lack of ulterior motives.”

“Do you believe in God Mr. Feuerstool?”

“Why should I, he doesn’t believe in me.”

–Mandelbrot Feuerstool at his trial.

Subtle is the Lord

I really should not care, or have to, - to reiterate my unconcern. In case you hadn't yet noticed, being from a long line, an extended line of hereditary liars, dating back to the first magnetic excursion, the first quadabatic reversal and being one of the proudest and most long standing offenders of the standard orientations of moral piety, (those who never resumed their normal flux following the first disruption of those unseen lines of polarity so long ago, preserved in the cooling magma as forever diametric, orthogonally perverse, permanently opposed and at odds with the normal alignment of the world), it is this man who stands, or rather sits before you today, silent, unreflective, unrepentant.

And he is as guilty, as am I. There is therefore no need to concern yourselves with any residual furtive taint of terror, no maze of concealed motive to be negotiated, no hidden pattern discerned, no deceptive cameos hiding a message to be prized from the well groomed garden of intellect like ornaments off a plaster statue, but those that may like a fig leaf may be used to hide a rather well-proportioned lie. For those of you who seek, who would endeavor, to garnish the plain, bald, fact with engorged explanation I have nothing to offer you but the well-shaven organ of reality. The man who killed the astronomer, Kirlew Hume, must claim at least partial responsibility for the death of Captain MacRae as well. The question of who exactly pulled the trigger, as is whether it was just a question of finishing a job started by someone, that 'else' is irrelevant. The reasons, but a moment ago, I dared convey to you without benefit of the battery of artifice at my disposal, but, now, I hesitate anything further, indeed at this juncture I find I cannot, -. I will not insult the self assembling facts with constructed motivation. Yet somehow I find I am still compelled to draw aside the snowy curtain of speculation further. The facts are so fetchingly arrayed, they beckon like a Dutch prostitute in a cramped window showcase. They summon forth the panting ghosts of the Sierras who wander unobstructed by the careful stitching of mortality, who rise from their calcified thrones to be granted some brief existence, whether of flesh or entirely of words. Provided even this tentative access, they callously intrude further (like Anthony Hopkins into the cavernous Hitchcockian imagination), wielding various lengths of a frozen stalactite, naked, into the cleansing shower of imagination, seeking there an artery of black

discontent without the intervening luminescing soap bubbles, without the refractive-maudlin-pedal point-morality cascading from a thousand drooling lips, this, so that this variegated-chromatic-prismatic-aberration of nature and narrative may emerge, at least momentarily, into a single cleansing focus,— so that I may speak (more or less) directly to you, so that you may understand the nature of this betrayal beforehand, without interference, or excuses, or untoward mystery, unimpugned by religiosity, or science, but plainly so.

Well, what can I say to that? What is there left to say but that these events were driven by cosmic and geologic forces, forces with which Kirlew Hume himself was far better acquainted than I, -(or you, for that matter), and for which, however evocative of the bald lie were likely to appear in the end unconsidered, flat and trivial, flattering semaphores wiped across the steamy (ah steam) mirror of dissimulation by a quivering self-accusatory finger which, is no doubt how you will eventually shave this explanation as well.

So it should be abundantly clear by now, I should need not reiterate, and you, you who are recording this, no need to supply the gloss, to you white-suited flounders, ghoulish scribblers who record, thinking I speak in anger or acted out of revenge, I know you writers thrive on flattery; I beg you, note well these three suppositions, firstly that all claims to greatness must arise from some titanic contest, that this contest must mirror some preordained dialectic, two well-matched but opposing, conflicting forces; positive and negative, and lastly, that through the struggle of these two, truth at last emerges (a truth that you are so eager to expose in your sighing prose),—but, note well this truth which clasps at its core a central falsehood, the heuristic falsehood which serves like a scourge to send matters forward, a dynamo impelling them toward some ineluctable mathematical end, so that when at last that elusive endpoint is reached, at the very precipice, one will be confronted by some greater depth, some more cavernously revealing truth. That is all quite frankly, just bullshit, so, fuck all that.

So, I will therefore spare you the facile explanations, the rococo arabesques of logic, indeed, like my opponent, eschewing any but the simplest, most facile of explanations in that I choose to focus on the initial lie rather than the eventual truth. My own goal therefore is, as stated, to provide you only a

simulacrum of truth, albeit one that is as compellingly bright as the lie it mirrors. The useful, the rococo, the embroidered, the mordantly tattooed; all these lie prostrate and bloody driven before you by the drumbeat of formula, still as a sated tick, plain, unadorned, unmatched.-- lies, lodged with all the other lies, like seeds in a pomegranate, that together form not me or mine or something proper, in fact nothing but the corpus of that great astronomer himself.

So, I will not be coy. I refuse to prostrate myself before the bar of justice—at least not for the sake of truth when the defense offered here is that all of man’s greatest and most notable achievements all his endeavors are, (at least in the telling of them,) based to some degree on dissimulation. Dressing it up, fleshing out the lie, buying it the correct suit of clothes, a tie. This attempt to cram an unquestionably viciously adipose foot into a flashier boot, is of course always a dangerous game, a game which, like chess, can amount nothing less than a distilled form of combat (resulting at the very least in severe bunions), but it is one which we are at last ready for.--- You may write that down, flounders.

In relying so, I therefore harbor no hope that you may eventually perhaps come to understand me as something besides a mere reprobate, a criminal, a weak man incapable of telling the truth but rather as a man driven by forces greater, more symmetric than he can comprehend, -palindromic forces; forces which, like the methane gas quivering above alkaline-infused-washing-machine waters of Mono Lake, work ceaselessly to expose unlaundered truth hidden beneath the easily penetrated but caustic gunmetal surface. The facts will speak for themselves, the solutions they propose to the mind, like Captain Alden’s grey-blue eyes, somehow so far out of joint with the stars, that the truth concealed therein should not, indeed cannot be preserved or see the light of day except in its most bizarre and ugly incarnation, -well that is just unvarnished fact too.

What can I finally hope to gain by all this? Sympathy? Understanding? No, either one is pointless so, at this point, I am content to lapse into frozen certitude. A chess game may end in a stalemate. Anything else to be said is self-serving drivel coating those who spew it, as they get most of it on themselves, -- poorly spit tobacco. However, a stalemate results only with the loss of a queen and I for one could never sacrifice a queen (whether or not she provided a really good chaw!). So, the

question is not what I hope to gain by all this but rather what I hope to lose, brother.

Well said. Well said! Such is the life of those pursued, being force to turn and face their illusions head on at last is the only endgame, and that is why I have come here, that is why you were dragged here, why I have dragged you here, not to perform an inquest, but merely to observe a body of lies in its natural state? Yes that's right. What? Silent then? It is up to you to choose a punishment.

Should I seek forgiveness? What do you propose? What tack should I take to this end? Yes, I ask you. Religion and science both shout their claims in my deaf ears. Pahhh! Either suit my purposes so I have stubbornly encamped here neatly in neither precinct, skirting both, in fact I have no faith, in faith I have no facts, fact, no faith in the naughty rules of a game to which I am still currently subscribed. If religion entombs my passion with its codified scripts and rituals, nothing more than a polite attempt to beat God at his own game then,

Excuse me?

What exactly was it you wanted say to me? Sorry, did not mean to spit. Yes, it's true, I have become exercised. I prefer the more primitive forms of combat and their prelude, as far as science, like the cannibal king Veindovi, I would prefer to die than see the face of the future in my enemy.

This being all only partially true, therefore I for now resolve at least to stick to science which is by far the more ruthless and the less inflated of the two in the long run and much more tolerant of the useful lie.

The Celestial Sniper

As if further proof of the far reaching effects of the unthinking antipathy of nature were required, in the summer of 1859, the universe would employ a deadly and accurate gambit in an attempt to extinguish those carrying on their surveying activities off the coast of Santa Barbara and the human

race in general, and employ it to great advantage, (if with poor timing). On June 17th, - a morning that arrived fair and clear, an adiabatic cloud of heat descended from the mountains near Santa Barbara, the first ever to be recorded in the United States as reported by the USCS *Ewing* anchored off Goleta just leeward of the channel islands. The crew first noticed what sounded like distant cannon fire or gas exploding. Thud, -thud, thud! The northwest wind dumped a plasmatic wall of compressed superheated air into the valley which descended out over the strangely quiescent bay with scorching temperatures of close to 133 degrees, this occurring between 1:30 and 2:00 PM. Birds fell from the sky or drowned themselves purposefully to escape the heat, crops withered where they stood in the fields. In fact the thuds the crew of the *Ewing* had heard were cattle launching themselves over the cliff in an attempt to get to the ocean and landing on the wet sand instead. Cattle inland died more slowly, in more anguish, seeking the shade of live oak trees whose leaves, by 1:45 had shriveled, gone brown in almost an instant. The lead in the bullets on the Army firing range at San Diego melted in the chambers causing weapons to misfire and injure their owners, spiders wrapped themselves in their webs like cocoons immersed in urine to stave off the scorching wind.

That was not the end of it. Not by far. On August 30th of that same year, the sun, with the accuracy of a sniper, would unleash a bullet directed squarely at a far larger target. The projectile would arrive at its intended victim, the entire earth, ninety-seven hours and fifteen minutes later. It would be of necessity, due to the great distances involved, not composed of heavy lead molecules, or rotting meat, or adiabatic heat or for that matter flying spiders, but of almost weightless free electrons, plasma.

Scientists attempting to understand what had occurred more than a century later gave the former the name of 'Kadabatic inversion', or KI, and to the latter CME; or 'coronal mass ejection' or as, they jokingly referred to it (in a misguided homage to the Who's rock opera, 'Tommy'), the 'see-me' or when referring to both conjunctively, the 'kick me'. Aside from the attempts at sophomoric humor, I can tell you this, both were clearly just different manifestations of that singularly unthinking malignant antipathy, an attempt to wrestle us into non-existence. The innate hatred of the inanimate for the animate, also known to the Chinese as the 'will of heaven'.

What further linked these two events, apart from the general death and destruction inflicted, was that the precursor cosmic nocturnal emission, coincided with a partial reversal of polarity in the earth's magnetic field, during that same interval, incurring that lunging upthrust of a magmatic pocket, wringing thus the curious rock formation from the sea of Cortez, that same previously unsorted piece of undersea geology which had probably almost provoked the plangent passing of the clipper ship, *Stilwell S. Bishop* into the quenching bosom of the sea some thirteen thousand years later and which most certainly in fact did (ironically) at least hasten to a fell concordance if not explicitly chime the subsequent end of the captain of the U.S.C.S. *Ewing*.

The precursor geomagnetic event, the knee to the groin coitus, called, (geologists may correct me), the LasChamp's Excursion (or as some of the scientists jokingly refer to it as, the 'Last Chance Excursion') had itself been preceded by a remarkably similar intercostal flexure called the 'Mono Lake Excursion' this occurring another ten thousand years prior and resulting rather more successfully, unlike the only partially successful pinioning attacks on the *Stilwell Bishop* and the *Ewing*, in the almost complete erasure of higher life from the North American continent, an event referred to generally as the Paleo-Indian catastrophe (though some would argue if it was a catastrophe then why are we here to complain about it) and one which scoured the life from the great plains, with the exception of the magnetically inert bison, lending the entire continent much of its vast, unspoiled, uncrowded splendor plus a good supply of beef jerky, both of which, had survived intact even to the arrival of those tardy, errant, panting electrons in the year 1859.

Captain Alden's recollection that Kirlew Hume had died in Argentina during an argument over beef jerky was however misplaced, somewhat inaccurate and too hastily concocted to hold water as was his uncured imputation of suicide to the death of Captain MacRae. I will not testify to the truth of either (I would not be believed anyway) but as regards the former, I know this for certain, (because the bullet in question was one I into the back of Kirlew Hume's head), that regardless of the strident claims made by certain of the Mormon sect and members of various other post-apocalyptic sects, (and indeed not for lack of trying to steer this into their religious ex machina), it was in fact I, not their prophet guided by some heavenly arcing angel or smiling pasty-faced cherubim who finally dispatched my late

prospecting partner, dear friend of naval officer Archibald MacRae, astronomer formerly assigned to the Gilliss expedition to South America, Kirlew Hume, to his heavenly reward.

The fact that all this occurred during the aforementioned crippling bout of the celestial nausea, employed in fact the same means, indeed the very same weapon MacRae owned and which was the method of his dispatch, were in my view mere coincidences, pleasant meaningless symmetries much as was our presence in the Owen Valley that day, not a planned correspondence timed to any particular celestial event, (as the Gilliss expedition had been tied to the appearance of the parallax of Venus), nor an unwanted juxtaposition resulting from any expected reversal of polarity or kadabatic inversion (either magnetic or moral), but rather occurring during a CME as it did, without any extraneous celestial bruehaha, with just its own kind of interstitial topsy turvy logic. If you want my opinion that is.--

I think rather, as he gazed reverently into his twenty-inch telescope that Thursday morning, from near our rough camp near the Owens River, just outside of the Bishop Tuff, observing the CME as it occurred, logic in fact was the furthest thing from his mind, –and he being ironically perhaps the only person on earth to actually understand what he was looking at at the time, that in doing so he quite accidentally inaugurated, ushered in a new cycle, a new round if you will of solar magnetic colonoscopic examinations. It took only a fraction of a second, (not the CME of course which as I have said took a full ninety seven hours to arrive), but rather the terrestrial bullet. It was deadly accurate. It too occurred, coincided or more accurately precipitated an irresistible reversal of polarity.

Kirlew Hume was himself, if anything, a handsome and most of all symmetric (in a non-Hermitian sense) man, or at least he had been until I arrived. He knew well before anyone else that destruction was on its way, only he was looking obsessively in the wrong direction so, in that sense, his death was both avoidable and grammatically correct, - it was, as they say, entirely on its own terms an act either of love, irony or a mathematical rape spawned by his inordinate physical handsomeness, a more forcible conjugation cannot be calculated. At least so I have told myself. (Spits)

Aurora

So, in the year of the Aurora there were clearly other non-terrestrial influences at work; almost certainly inexplicable, obviously conflicting currents, sporadic effluxions, vagrant magnetic lines, ineffable shifts in gravity, sparks of an indefinable other-wordly spasmodic color, some kind of hyperplastic voodoo being dislodged or dislodging from the diverticulate cosmic colon and about to come barreling down the crap encrusted chute of fate. In the Chinese community the astrologers fell to mumbling morosely and predicting strange occurrences, confirming and reconfirming in allied Feynmanian trajectories; in tea leaves, cast sticks, Joss smoke, and bird counting all pointing to some common, clearly unwanted imminent intrusion of the divine into human affairs.

“The year of the Ram favors good-looking, handsome people.” This was all Lee, the Astrologer, would say at first and even this he had merely mumbled. The Chinese couples at Mono Lake who wanted to have handsome children fell to boinking each other like rabbits in the year of the Horse which preceded (not to belabor the heavenly animal metaphor) the year of the Ram in the Chinese calendar. However, as everyone, at least everyone here understood, good looking people were always apt to be inherently dangerous, prone to causing dissension, antipathic to the equilibrium of civil discourse and social cohesion. Sooner or later they would prove destructive of the elaborate if tattered weft of social fabric they had hauled here piecemeal with them over the mountains of the eastern Sierra. Even if the Chinese newspapers had not got it right, all pointing to the fact that in that year (4555 in the Chinese Calendar), certain ineluctably destructive events were likely to occur there, had already begun, that even so, almost certainly, some unlooked for rending of the formerly close knit immigrant community was imminent. As Astrologer Lee had reluctantly pointed out, most likely, extraordinarily handsome people would be at the root of it.

“Venerable Astrologer Lee, you told us that if we wanted handsome children we should begin to have lots of sex in the year of the horse. We brought you a present of a pig leg (lest you forget). Now my wife is pregnant, if heaven smiles it will be a male born in the year of the Ram. Now you tell me that

in the year of the Ram the world will be falling apart mostly because of these very same people.” Wai Fuk complained wringing each hand alternately.

“How can I bring a child into a world where chaos will be the dominant ruler?” His wife Shu echoed shrilly, eyeing the uneaten portion of the ham hock.

“Character is but the mandate of heaven.” The Astrologer replied cryptically, also following Shu Wai Fuks wife’s gaze. Things were turning ugly.

If character was indeed the mandate of heaven, it apparently extended this mandate to a tendency to rob and shoot by some badmuthafuckers. In the fall of 1858 CE, there had been an average of one murder and five robberies per month occurring in the small, but growing mining town of Bodie. While in itself a rather serious civil, moral and judicial problem it also became something of a logistical crisis after one of the prisoners (need I mention of which extraction), arguably more handsome than the rest of the unshaven scruffy reprobates, escaped. Yee Park, burned down the town jail around himself after burrowing a hole into the cell floor and covering himself with a blanket soaked in his own piss to shield himself from the flames (just because you are handsome does not mean you are not at least as resourceful as a spider).

For some correspondingly, statistically bizarre reason, all of the anomalously criminal acts committed by Chinese occurred on Tuesday, as if some celestial alarm clock governing deviant criminal behavior struck, sprouting diurnal attenuated and predictable arms, splayed across heaven like locust recalling a memo from the appointment book of heavenly plagues, pointing to two disparate and parallel but otherwise apparently unlinked afflicting constellations, ideographs, synchronies; Tuesday and handsomeness.

And, again as if like clockwork, just as astrologer Lee had predicted, the cohesiveness of the Chinese community of the eastern Sierra began to disintegrate. Grudges developed between formerly allied families. New and bizarre means of death and torture were evolved during the formerly idyllic hours spent cultivating vegetables. Corpses, their mouths stuffed with fly larvae started showing up floating in the alkaline waters of Mono lake. Naturally, at first the Indians were suspected as the culprits. They

were the ones after all with the largest ready store of Koo-cha-bee, their name for the dried fly larvae. The real culprits became apparent rather quickly.

In a town where murder was as commonplace and permeating as bread mold, reasons for the calculated regularity of the spate of recent homicides were being knitted fast as baby socks. Each newly stitched, shiny story emerged from the corners of calloused fingers, infiltrating the telegraphs and railroad dining cars sequestered to the east, bright, like rivets on Levi Strauss jeans, electromagnetic and steam driven shuttlecocks looping, embroidering skeins on the tapestry of criminality, looms of hungry rumor spun their cloth day and night, seemingly independent of mechanical means. As if on the very air, the story spread east and west, the Chinees muthafuckers at Mono Lake and Bodie, these celestials, were finally killing each other in some peculiar wholesale fashion. Bang!! Finally! Acting like good Americans! The entire country could not have been more delighted if they had been asked to dine with the Queen.

Then, just as suddenly, the murders stopped. The shooting and burning stopped. Even the gossip stopped. The Chinese murder spree was eclipsed and extinguished by a nocturnal heavenly display of such magnificent breadth and magnitude, a display of unbounded energy as to have never been witnessed in living memory; a resurgent effulgent perihelion that overwhelmed and made petty the former distinctions of day and night. It dwarfed everything, silenced everything for a time. No longer were the Chinese the sole vessels of the mandate of heaven. That responsibility had been lifted from them by the great display which enveloped the skies, stretching from the vast, vaulted empyrean of Nevada and eastern California eastward to the mottled lichen carpets of snow corseted Maine. It spanned the entire northern hemisphere, extending west even to Sam Leon's homeland in China where it was called the breath of the dragon. In Bombay it was called Parvati's dance of seduction. In Texas, the Devil's reading lamp. Across North America it corrupted the nascent splines of progress, erupting the tools and mechanisms of telegraphic communication with spontaneous fires, short circuits, vagrant magnetic pulses, surging, elaborating through the overwhelmed solenoids of the repeaters, tracing effulgent, swaying flames racing along the course of tenuous tentacle lines, toiling across the continent like a furred whip hastening on some fiery chariot of pre-ordinate destruction.

On the morning of September 3rd, the line between Maine to Boston had begun behaving rather strangely.

Boston –‘Please! Cut off your battery entirely for fifteen minutes.’

Portland–‘Will do’-- a pause-- ‘It is now disconnected.’

Boston—‘Mine too, disconnected. We are working solely with the auroral current. And how do you receive my writing?’

Portland–‘Better than with the batteries. The current comes and goes gradually.

Boston–‘My current is very strong at times --the Aurora seems to neutralize and augment our batteries, makes the current too strong at times for our relay magnets. Suppose we work without batteries while we are affected by this trouble?’

Portland–‘Very well. Shall I go ahead with the regular business?’

Boston–‘Yes, by all means go ahead.’

The telegraph continued to work for two hours that morning without any batteries connected.

One could only imagine the breadth and extent of damage that would have been wrought on a more technology dependent era, this can only be guessed at, but for a brief time the assumptions about what drive men together and what drives them apart, whether along currents of personal antipathy or electromagnetic sympathy, were temporarily confounded by the heavenly confluence of solar infused currents and atmospheric dust. Despite the fascination with these coincidences and though they received much more attention in the eastern press than locally, it was clearly no longer just the Chinese who were mowing each other down with alarming mechanical regularity, like ducks in a carnival side show, it was fuckin’ everybody.

“Goodbye God, I’m goin’ to Bodie”

“P&P’ or ‘Crackdown’ name your action! Plunk it down right there, on the bar pardner.”

The dark-haired short man with the weather beaten face and fancy vest croaked. ‘Crackdown!’. The bright strophic sound of hard silver slapped onto the wood counter, every bit captured under the

calloused hand of the bartender except the echo which wakened the street like church bells calling the faithful. The term 'Crackdown', in Bodie at least, denoted something other than the vigorous assertion of law and order. Like the alliterative alternative, 'Pecker & Proboscis', it indicated instead the salient, defining features of that particular stretch of human anatomy to have most lately collided with the ground in mortal supinity.

The miners on any given Saturday afternoon, when not slamming back shots of Cutter Extra were uniformly preoccupied laying bets on the vagaries of vertiginity, how the next man to get shot on the main street of Bodie would fall. Face forward, 'P&P', Pecker & Proboscis was the most popular with, 'Crackdown' a close second. The fancyvestwearin' Sam Warrington, usually inclined to the former outcome was therefore often in the position of having to give odds. Sam was head of the miner's union and coincidentally was most often betting against the miners with their own pension money. He did not look at it as stealing. He thought of it as investing.

"Silver dollar on Crackdown' said Sam as the fight which had just erupted over a faro game spilled out onto the street."

"I'll take that action, - but I ain't got no printed dollar. Just this here dust with no 'cert' but it's outta Indian Queen." A grizzled old miner sidled up to him wiping his nose with the handkerchief now relieved of its load..

"Good enough for me!" Warrington pronounced, appraising the pile that magically appeared on the shiny bar, expertly noting the slight nickel haze which identified it clearly as Indian Queen ore and waiting for the inevitable shots to ring out.

"Somebody's sportin' flannel capped pine."

This was the name for the bargain price coffins the unlucky victims would end up in, with two holes cut for the wool or flannel encased feet to extend through, shortened to save on wood. They were in pretty much constant demand.

"I'm giving P&P action at two on three. Any takers?"

Immediately following the appearance of the Aurora in the skies that August , there had been a brief

hiatus in the murder spree due to an outbreak of virulent gonorrhoea but fairly quickly the Saturday afternoon shootings resumed as did the wholesale destruction of any new buildings in town as the miners usually filled in the lulls in wagering by pulling down any structure newly erected in town, usually around their own ears, usually resulting in, for those still conscious, a renewed round of hard drinking usually on the house at the competitions' which they had prudently left standing.

Occasionally the victim of a shooting would put the assembled anxious spectators into a funk by falling down dead on his side. Even at twenty to one no one ever took that action so this was attributed to 'sheer orneriness' and these victims were dubbed 'French Canadians' or 'frozen frogs', known for being stubbornly noncommittal. Such disputes were generally resolved fairly quickly by hurling bottles, usually half empty bottles, at the corpse to see which way it fell and failing that, resorting to full bottles and in the extreme case launching an equally well-primed woman of dubious morals in the general direction of the prone man, this only after a silver dollar had been inserted neatly in his oral cavity as an encouragement to accuracy. The catholic projectile approach never failed, at least until the Aurora had appeared, then everything got fucked up and good.

One Saturday afternoon after several bottles of good whiskey had already been wasted on the latest casualty, a lone wolf miner from Dogtown, and since most of the whores were in a bad and uncooperative mood, Sam Warrington finally raising his manicured hand and in his uncategorizable accent put a halt to it.

"This feller ain't goin' down no how."

"You can say that again," one of the whores yelled out from the window above the saloon occasioning a spate of curiously avian laughter.

"Well whadauwedo now?"

"Haul Tim Machin up here to decide this. He's the most precarious man in these here parts."

The call was echoed by the rest of the crowd, or at least those who had gotten over their dose, the cry itself curiously curative, "Machin! Machin!"

T.N. Machin had acquired a reputation in Mono County as a no nonsense fellow after his having shot

a toll collector on the Bodie-Aurora Turnpike for demanding the toll, this just a year after his arrival. A few hours later when he arrived on the scene, most of the crowd was assembled outside the blacksmith shop where the body still lay. Some were interested parties, others conscripted as witnesses, lest one of those interested give the corpse a shove into some more definitive Cardinality. Hibiscus flowers from the whorehouse and sourdough biscuits were strewn around next to the corpse, not in respect, but to catch any intruding imprint. One of the miners had gotten his hands on a surveyor's transit and was inexpertly trying to determine if the minutes and seconds indicated the body was already fatally inclined one way or the other.

Ignoring the dried blood and flies which had accumulated as a pastiche of incipient decay, Machin began inspecting the corpse, making careful notes on a yellow pad with the stub of a pencil and grunting in a repetitive low guttural fashion. Finally he spoke.

"This poor fella it seems has, or rather had, an extraordinarily large nasal protuberance." He intoned this last in the measured formulaic tones of a forensic investigator, –the miners nodded sagely in unison, approving and uniformly impressed by his scientific approach,

"I would expect, seein' as he was shot in the back, he probably fell forward initially you see," illustrating by an inclination of his own "and then and his extraordinary facial feature caused him to then tilt over t'other side providing a point of sustainable instability, a vertex. I'm going to have to call this a case of Proboscis Interruptus." Having been formally trained as a lawyer in Albany Machin often introduced 'latinisms' into his speech so no one might confuse him for a mere saddlebag lawyer. "What's azat he said?" one of the deaf miners called out, after having waited patiently half the day for the verdict."

"He said put out a peck o' biscuits on his forehead."

"Pecker biscuits. Damn, and I thought it was his pecker wood keeping him upright. "

"Sure nuf wasn't his pecker wood, -- it was the hibiscus."

"Damn stale biscuits, might as well be wood."

This strange and strained extrapolation seemed to settle the argument for most of those assembled but it placed Sam Warrington clearly on the losing side of the wager and Warrington was not a man to let sleeping dogs lie, even if he did occasionally allow that dispensation to corpses.

“Sorry. You lose this one looks like.” Sam Leon had said to him.

“You’re blind Machin, -“ Warrington called out. “Clean your glasses!”

“Why don’t you clean ‘em.” Machin replied without losing a beat, hocking up a big wad of spit into his rather frilly lavender scented handkerchief and offering it to him.

Machin’s other hand was on the hilt of his Colt revolver so Sam decided to take the loss. It wasn’t his money anyway after all.

When not illuminated by the slow burning fuse of the white hatred or cast into relief by the ethereal variegated light of justice cast by auroral imperatives, that is, unless they were actively shooting each other, the Chinese were largely invisible to the other residents of the town. As a result they found they could come and go as they pleased and hardly be noticed. This made the more astute of them, like Sam, privy to some of the more interesting goings on in Bodie. Consequently, Sam Leon had long been aware of Warrington’s novel ‘investment strategy’ for the miner’s pension fund. That he had never said anything about it was because he looked on it as a matter of civic pride. Warrington was a public figure. At least the money was staying in Bodie. What was the harm?

“You lose this one Mistah Warrington.” Sam Leon said consolingly.

“Damn if that Machin ain’t a wise-ass paytroon claimjumper.” Still steaming as he paid off the miners.

“He a pretty clean boy for Bodie. Everyting legal like. No harm.”

“Yeah, well, there’s clean and then there’s crazy clean.”

Sam Leon was, as usual, right. What was the harm? Sure as the trickle of post-glacial streambeds found the nearby western shores of Mono Lake, most of the gold and silver panned or dug in these hills that did not percolate into Sam Warrington’s larcenous pockets would matriculate its way over to the assay office in Virginia City after which the men who had conveyed it thence in socks, kerchiefs and saddlebags would repair to the nearest saloon with their fresh assay certificates, hallmarked nuggets and quitclaim deeds, all acceptable as legal tender where, the speculators, stock men, bankers and charlatans dressed in fine St. Louis linen suits lurked to relieve them of their new found wealth faster

than a gold watch fob off a Bodie corpse.

Lined up inside the sturdily erected Occidental Saloon over the ample 'superior hot lunch' they would loudly extol the satisfaction of thriftiness and capital investiture

"We are offering a limited bond holding to the first five hundred takers. Ya'll better lock it up fast."

"My money is safe where I can git at it if I need to."

"Well, the Spring Valley Water company is going to be a bonanza. You can take that to the bank. Ya wanna be the prospector with the fattest mattress in the world? They'll be supplying the city of San Francisco with water before snow melt. Money don' help nothin' in your shoe though copper'l help the fungus some I'm told." After a few beers, the miners usually relented.

"Here ya go. Gimme fifty shares o' that fish pee."

"Sorry ole timer we don't take no raw gold unless it's with an assay cert."

Therefore, despite both Sams' diligent efforts to the contrary, a goodly percentage of the gold dust and nuggets dug from the Bodie Hills were still being exchanged over shots of whisky for worthless certificates of stock and partnership stakes in the latest get-rich-quick scheme to be propounded by one of these itinerant sharpers. The Spring Valley Water Company would never produce a drop of water or liquor for that matter. It's collapse a year later would however come to fame as the motive for the Empire City massacre which was a fitting ending seeing as both were pure fictions.

Finally, seeking to staunch the drain on the local economy, the civic association got an assay office set up in Bodie. Thereafter, a larger portion of wealth was deposited locally, like the terminal moraine of the nearby receding glacier, finding its way to the pockets of the local proprietors like Sam Leon or one of the other local establishments that had sprung up on the wind-scoured streets of Bodie like window-boxed wildflowers. That which did not get spent directly on liquor, black powder, opium, salt pork or wagering ended up in one of the seven whorehouses on what would be called King Street where, unlike in the Virginia City saloons, at least the customers knew ahead of time they were going to get screwed by the numbers. Inevitably the 'stock men' found their way to Bodie and certificates

for the “Bodie Bluffs Consolidating Mining Company” started showing up both in Bodie and San Francisco.

The Lee Yong Vegetable Company

Sam Leon ran the small store on King Street that sold fresh and pickled produce most of which came from the Chinese gardens near Mono Lake, grown on the small plots there, when their owners weren't busy shooting or boinking one another.

“You want ‘sparagus, we got no ‘sparagus this week. You take sweet potato fine and dandy.”

“The undertaker’ll fit me for a pine flannel coffin sooner ‘en I’ll eat a sweet patayter.

That’s nigras food.”

“You try, you likee. Maybe you eat some black pussy too!”

The fresh stores were brought up twice a week by Cherokee Liz, who laded them on the back of her bilious one-eyed mule ‘Gunfight’, so named because he more than once had nearly caused both his own and his owner’s premature death through bouts of unexpected explosive flatulence that had on one occasion or the other startled one or more of the gun-toting miners. Fortunately for ‘Gunfight’ and for Liz, most of the miners were extraordinarily poor shots and worse when drunk, which since they were almost continuously rendered Liz fairly safe.

Sometimes Sam Lee Yong paid her in cash, other times he paid in trade with goods obtained from San Francisco which she could then barter with the Mono Chinese; rare varieties of seed for perennial versions of annual vegetables or joss sticks, sold for the neat gardens or the ancestor shrines harbored inside the front doors of the compact residences. On his most recent trip he had purchased a batch of red silk sashes embroidered with gold threaded calligraphy intended to convey good luck. He had intended to buy one to place over the bar but ended up taking the entire crate.

“How’m I gonna sell all these? Ya got, looks like two hundred or more here. I can convey ‘em but there ain’t more’n fifty Chinee families in Mono.” She complained, starting to pout.

“Don’t be worry conveyin’. You see.” Sam replied confidently, shooing her out the door.

As usual Sam was right and his timing had been impeccable to book. Gonorrhoea provided an unlooked for economic boon to business. The miners had quickly bought up most of them before Liz even had a chance to deliver them to Mono and she was able to double the price when they employed her to remove the silk threads of the calligraphy and sew in a waistband for their new silk long john underwear. She had never been more popular.

“Yah y’all, I done got me some of them lucky celestial silk underdrawers, smoooooth,-jes like sheep titty.” The miners would bleat happily while sucking on a boiled gull egg. The admission was in fact redundant as the look of celestial harmony on their faces compared to those wearing the scratchy unlined underwear was testimony enough. Plus it was Liz who brought up the baskets of gull eggs from the lake. When pickled by Sam they provided a treat of which the miners were inordinately fond.

Though the miners resented Sam, despite their grumblings, most were happy to be charged top dollar by the canny proprietor for the crunchy Bok Choy, carrots, fresh cabbage, eggplant and potatoes. There were occasional complaints which he handled deftly and if less than diplomatically.

“These here taters are soggy as rent in the rain!”

“Not soggy! What you want crunchy potato for you pea-brain! Your brain soggy, full of water. And you got no teeth! Stupid dumb ox.”

“Yahhy, soo, iszat what you gettin’ at. Special process ehh.”

“ This very *old* special process, Chinese secret, make soft. Easy chew.”

“Special Chinese process chew my ass.”

“Wrinkly like your ass, makee soft for you. Easy for chew. I no charge extra just for you. You take.”

Sam Leon gloried in being an entrepreneur and things seemed to be going swimmingly, if that is an apt adjective to describe the perennially parched convection governing events in the town, that is, until Kin Lam got his head bashed in while he was unloading eggplants on King Street.

The Killing of Kin Lam in Black and White

Like his boss Sam Lee Yong, Kin Lam had been forced to give up mining for the more reliable if modest income afforded by regular employment. Like many of the other ‘Chinee paylados’, or salaried workers, he competed with the Paiute for menial work on the weekends supplementing his meager income by cutting and hauling wood. His modest ambitions were rewarded by his being whacked on the head with a frying pan one afternoon.

“Hey! This boy ain’t been shot! This here looks like plain murder!”

“Hey Leon, you better call the sheriff, your boy here got a concavity in his chopstick holder.”

“Ohh, my, what gonna be here, this ain’t no good.”

Sam had shown up with the sparse belongings of his deceased employee at the sheriff just about three o’clock, an hour after poor Kin had officially been declared dead.

“Wha-chayu got there boy?”

“Mebbe shave kit. I find.”

The metal box had been hidden under the floorboards in back of the vegetable stand.

“Kin Lam, he have no family, go China ”

“Give it here. Why, this here is empty. Locks busted too. Look here, where’d you find this? Kinda makes it look like a robbery.”

“Me no robber man. Box in floor in back of store. Jes like that.”

Nevertheless, the sheriff arrested Sam Leon for the murder.

Being a man of some resources, he had hired T.N. Machin to defend him and Machin had ridden up from Mono the evening before the scheduled trial. After a couple of drinks he wandered over to the new jail where Sam was being held.

“Hey! This here is a mighty nice jail! Pretty fancy. Good grub?”

“Yeah, maybe I burn down anyhow.” Sam said glumly eyeing the new thick oak flooring.

“Sam, buddy, we need to talk about what happened.”

The broken lock box was pretty incriminating. By the time of the trial no other witnesses to Kin’s death had come forth. Machin knew he had little choice but to have Sam testify on his own behalf.

“I call Sam Leon to the stand.”

The thin, razor-burned prosecutor sprang to his feet sputtering. “Your honor, –the defense knows

goddamn well that Chineese caint testify in open court.”

“I’ll thank you to watch your language in my courtroom, there be no invoking of the Lord’s name either for a witness or in any manner implying juris imprudence.”

Machin now rose with a book in his hand, opening to a page which he had dog eared.

“I kindly refer you to the recent decision of the California Supreme Court where it says the Chinese are barred from testifying against white men. I have no intention of asking Mr. Leon here to testify against any white man.”

“How do we know that, your honor, huh, it ain’t proper.”

“Well if, you find it not to be the case, you’re welcome to make a prodigious fool of yourself again at that time or at any time, but mark my words it will not be soon enough for me!” Machin thundered, glaring at the prosecutor who now flushed the color that made it impossible to distinguish the razor burns.

“I’ll allow it.” The judge said.

“State your name.”

“Sam Lee Yong.”

“In English please.”

“Folk call me Sam Leon.”

“Well, we are just folks here. How long have you operated your store on King Street Mr. Leon?”

Machin was still flushed with his early small victory.

“Name, Mistah Lee,—Yong last name.”

“Mr. Lee how long have you operated the vegetable store in question.”

“Two, mebbe three years.”

“Are you aware sir,— that the deceased was unpacking vegetables at the time of his murder? This very box?” Machin motioned dramatically toward the crate the sheriff had impounded as material evidence.

“Please refer to that as an exhibit. This gesturing is really entirely unnecessary.”

“Mebbe he do,—unpack Cherokee Liz delivery from Mono like every Tuesday.” Sam replied guardedly, wiping a piece of imaginary snot with his baggy sleeve and taking out a toothpick.

“What kind-o vegetables was he unpacking this particular Tuesday? Note the box of eggplants has been brought into the courtroom.”

“Eggplants, –Chinese eggplants.”

“Eggplants! We are advised for the record. Those eggplants””

“I think mebbe.”

“I like you to mark that box evidence one. Are not eggplants, Chinese or otherwise, like the tomato, members of the nightshade family a family of vegetables reputed to cause madness?”

“Yeeaah!–Sam think so it is. I remember writing from seed package say nightly shade. Who need shade at night?” Sam responded chuckling leaning forward and looking around to see if anyone else had perceived the incipient humor in this. The stone faced jury seemed unamused.

“Lunch!” The judge yelled.

Negitivity

Like the versatile eggplant, the islands of Mono Lake came in two distinct chromatic varieties; black and white. Paoha, the paler and larger of the two, was the nesting area for migratory birds, playing host to tens of thousands of hungry South American Wilson’s Phalaropes decked out in their festive orange bibs and chopstick beaks and also the Eared Grebes with their look of perpetual astonishment. The competition for the best nesting sites provided an unending racket during the spring months. The Grebes, after years of failure were finally making inroads into the Paoha nesting areas of the year-round colony of gulls and so were particularly vocal.

Despite the vast quantities of bird droppings on its beaches, Paoha’s whiteness devolved not from the tons of dried feces but from the bleached diatomaceous skeletons which formed the upper two feet of the former alluvial soil of the lakebed. Negit, by contrast pure was formed of basaltic magma which had erupted slowly over the last few centuries lending it a dark and brooding presence. Volcanic action had pushed up the floor of the lakebed to establish both as visible protuberances. As if the contours of the lake were not hellish enough, when something startled the Grebe colony, their myriad shadows painted Paoha island a temporary dark gray, as if Eurydice, in punishment for being gazed on, it had slid momentarily back into gull shit Hades, making it indistinguishable for the moment from its smaller neighbor to the northwest.

The strikes of the Eastern Sierra in the mid 1850s, followed one after the other as regularly and devoutly as Sunday hymns, sung invocations to the mute faces of the uncomprehending rock which disclosed their heavenly secret only to a lucky few, and even then for only a short time. Increasingly the veins petered out quickly; the holes invariably proving dry within weeks, “I’m snake bit, hexed, jinxed!”, they complained even while they continued to flock to Mono, just like the Grebes and the Phalaropes drawn by the communion of black powder to the holy shrug of the continent.

The Chinese were another story. Tired of having the foot of the Tongs lodged perpetually on their backs, tired of the faceless antipathy, the anti-immigrant laws that clung to them like the white collar of larval corpses ringing the lake, they had shuttled here, east of the towering Sierras, still pursued by the measured drumbeat of opprobrium and suspicion, but hearing it grow fainter was enough. They filed out beyond the undulating hills of San Francisco, ascending the spine of the sleeping dragon attentive as chiropractors and on into the darkness, then, expelled from the Chinees Camps at Tuolumne and Salvado where fire shone in the belly like knives flashing in the night, up and down the flanks of the Tioga Pass, following the water downward, in pursuit of a long departed glacier, coursing through that long ventrifacted shrug of opaque geology to crest the shuddered swoon of sleepy Yosemite and finally skating down the smooth slopes of Lundy, still shoved and pummeled by the katabatic winds, driven downward like spiraling kites, queues whipping like tails, thrust ever further eastward.

When they first reached, Mono their first act had been to set up these little patches of vegetables on mounds of earth raised from the alkaline soil. They carried better topsoil with them down from the mountains in hand carts and fetched water from the stream two miles in the other direction, toward Machin’s claim, the otherwise sparse environs at the north end of the lake. They beat their dusty little community from the carpet of desert sage, concealed from the probing eyes of the Chinese Tongs, far away from the grasping tax men and far enough from the raucous manners of the lily-white town of Monoville where the universal spitting by redshirted miners lent the single sidewalk a brownish patina the color of opium. Unlike their felonious countrymen in Bodie still laboring under the spell of the astrologers, for a while they got along here quite admirably, both with each other and the world at

large. As the settlement grew it had marked each new addition with a low fence which echoed the swelling concentrically rising graveled ridges to the west that denominated the temporary resting places of the lake at its previous higher stages in ages past. It was as they said, “hai go-kei miu ge sing,” “a nice place” and thanks to the incessant odors and crippling lack of fresh water, one no one else much wanted or cared about which was just fine with them.

At one time there had been plenty of fresh water here. Cascading white-breasted glaciers lactated directly into the gurgling maw of a lake at one time the largest inland body of water in the Northern Hemisphere. The basin, formed by the same powerful volcanic event that produced the famous Long Valley Caldera expelled the unending intestinal confetti of rhyolite ash had been, congealing to the west as the Bishop Tuff, as meltwater regathered in the crater where the earth had slumped, exhausted from its effort, creating a vast, mineral rich, three-hundred-forty square mile colicky, fulminating inland volcanic sea. Over the ensuing seven hundred and fifty thousand years the Owens Creek sliced its way through the two hundred meter thick Silica and Rhyolite of Bishop Tuff to form the Owen River Valley. Mono Lake had then been still vast, still lapping the eastern fringes of the Tuff. Over the following millennia it had shrunk to less than an eighth its former size, a Tibetan mummy, back broken, cradled in a gravelly basin undergirded by a blue suppurating strata of clay, its shore separated from the tuff by miles of alkali infused sand.

Elusive outposts like Dogtown and Bennetville sprang up to the west amid the arid foothills. With the exception of Bodie and Aurora, most died as quickly as they had appeared; flowers after a desert rain, not massive eruptions of magma but small effluxes of greed leaving behind not welded sediments but only colorful names, rusted, abandoned equipment quickly scavenged, windowless shacks, another set of tall tales.

Inevitably, even the poor showing of the Bodie mines drew the tax men. Enforcement of the Foreign Miner’s Tax Act, provided a quick refresher course in the black capriciousness of their adoptive society and the tenuousness of their welcome on these shores. Barred from owning a producing mine or employing whites in any of their enterprises, the Chinese still found ways to generate income from

the local mineral endowments. They bought up rights to the abandoned or depleted placer mines and registered them in the names of deceased or imprisoned white owners. They rejuvenated supposedly played out strikes, built ingenious rocker cradles to re-sift the panned ore and rework the tailing piles. The miners sneeringly called them ‘celestials or alternately ‘snipers’,—an exclamation usually accompanied with a large juicy spit of masticated tobacco onto the ground or if convenient, the single brown sidewalk of Mono.

At forty-one years old Sam Lee Yong was not particularly handsome, but shrewd, patient, and persistently good humored. He, like many of his countrymen had been force seek several successive means to make an honest living as opportunities were progressively and callously circumscribed by each new bill coming out of Sacramento. The small vegetable store he had opened in Bodie survived with its special breakfast, ‘Bodie Pickle & Shovel’, this being pickled eggplant with gull egg omelet served with a squared off spoon. He did a good job pulling in the early birds, so to speak, with this particular combination proving a big hit locally. His fellow King Street merchants were not so happy with his success.

“Spend your good American gold in Sam Leon’s and rest assured it is goin’ out the back and straight into the hold of a China Clipper. Celestial ballast.” Most miners had early on convinced themselves that getting rich and keeping the Chinese poor was therefore akin to a patriotic duty. Celestial ballast, however un-American, was in that year, not enough to keep the world from turning topsy-turvy.

Non Compus Mencius

“Deadly nightshade?” If I am not mistaken. Machin crowed triumphantly, turning to face the jury, with his thumb hooked somewhat awkwardly in his lapel.

“Objection!”

“What grounds.”

“Speculation.”

“Your honor, the witness is an expert in the field of vegetables.” This evoked an involuntary titter

from the jury.

“Most eggplants if I am not mistaken are black, are they not, black and shiny as a nigra’s ass?”

“Watch yore epithets Mr. Machin!”

“We have special kine white eggplant from China.”

“Perhaps an even more noxious variety?” Machin was intentionally playing on the latent racial prejudices about Chinese expertise with various poisons held by the jurors. He glanced at them out of the corner of his eye. They leaned forward fully expecting Sam to finally confirm their firmly held suspicions regarding the malefactions of his race.

“Your honor, Mr. Machin cannot be implying that an eggplant was the murder weapon. The poor Chink’s skull was caved in.”

“If your honor will allow me some latitude.”

“I will allow some, but make your point expeditiously. I have some hangings to attend to today.”

“You no talk more!” Sam stood angrily, shaking his fist at Machin. He was confused and angered by the flurry of questions casting aspersions on his produce and now alarmed by the nonchalance of the judge’s last statement.

“Set yerself back down there, you heathen idiot,” the judge now cautioned vehemently.

Ignoring his client’s evident discomfiture Machin continued.

“It is common knowledge ingesting too much of the fruit of the nightshade plant can cause confusion, –even madness. Have you yourself ever eaten these so-called eggplants?”

“Sure, –many time, very good with sauteed pork in Wok, white eggplant.” He replied impatiently.

“Yes we are all acquainted with the ‘Pickle and Shovel’ breakfast as well as the line of good down filled wool gloves and socks you sell, the ‘Gull Darn Knits’ is it not?”

“Tell me, was the deceased wearing any protective clothing at the time?”

“He wear gloves, always wear gloves, no splinter from box.”

Machin, had grown up in upstate New York and his fairly prominent family had been friendly both with the powerful patroon landlords, the Schuylers, as well as William Seward, soon to be governor of that state and eventually Secretary of State under Abraham Lincoln. What occupied Machin’s legal mind at that particular moment was his recollection that in 1846 his friend Seward had caused

something of a stir in the legal community by introducing a novel strategy which would become known as ‘the insanity defense’. It was in the case of the murderer William Freeman, a black man. Eager to make his reputation and perhaps draw some national attention Seward, had asserted the novel thesis that a man must be in possession of his faculties to be held culpable of a crime. Machin seemed bent on employing this same novel defense strategy in Sam’s case, implying that the eggplants had induced some mental incapacity, though it was not clear who or what he was implying to be so affected. He also apparently had forgotten for the moment that Freeman was eventually convicted. Machin,–paused now, furrowing his brow.

“Did Kin Lam have any enemies,–anybody he might for instance like to poison,–perhaps by extracting poison from those white eggplants, perhaps then distilling it, utilizing this deadly elixir to drive them mad or worse?!” He was desperately trying to draw a connection between this and his and former line of questioning. The egg-shaped vegetable defense was proving unwieldy as a three wheeled baby carriage.

“Eggplant not poison! Not make you crazy! Not kill you! Only very good for stir fry. You no talk more!” Sam protested, growing more and more agitated at Machin casting aspersions on his produce. If acquitted, after all, he still had to make a living.

“Sit back down Mr. Leon.”

“I have nothing further.” Machin announced suddenly.

Sam sat back down at the table, glaring at Machin as the prosecution began its summation.

“Your honor, the defendant has demonstrated by his own testimony that he is very familiar with the use of a fry pan or as he calls ‘em, a warrk’. I would put it to you, it should be obvious that it was he who smacked poor Kin Lam who was in the process of unloading eggplants for him on the head with one and he who then stole the money from the poor man’s lock box. His own loyal employee who trusted him entirely. And what happened to the funds in that box? I ask you.

Robbery clearly was the motive and the result, incited by a fleshy vegetable or not, was foul murder.”

Machin now began his summation:

“Had he not mentioned the metal box to the sheriff, Sam Leon might never even have fallen under

suspicion but he chose to do so. You have it from an expert. Eggplants may or may not be poisonous but,—the real question is, did Kin Lam know that and more importantly did his murderer know that?” Machin now rose to his full 5'8" and faced the jury dramatically.

“I ask you again. Did Kin Lam have any enemies besides Sam Leon? He was unloading eggplants at the time of his death. He was wearing gloves at the time suggesting he wished to avoid skin contact. Whether they are in fact poison or not, there was the perception that they are,—what you must ask yourselves is whether there is in all this a black and white solution? Was not Sam Leon singled out merely because he is Chinese?” He then recalled Seward’s eloquent summation almost verbatim.

“The color of the prisoner’s skin, and the form of his features, are not impressed upon the spiritual immortal mind which works beneath,—he bears equally with us the proudest inheritance of our race—the image of our Maker.’ Hold him to be a Man,—not,— an eggplant.”

For its part, the jury might have been consuming white eggplants like they were going out of style because no one looked more confused than they at the jarring combination of the pedestrian, the bizarre and the eloquent. Thankfully, before he sat down a man burst excitedly into the bar serving as the courtroom,

“Drop your dicks and grab yore picks, boys,—the Comstock lode’s come in n’ll put sugar in the coffee and the cherries in the pie! Yee—yhawwn”

It was purely a matter of luck that no one got killed as the jurors scrambled over one another seeking escape from the hastily constructed jury box.

“Not guilty,—“ The judge pronounced, pounding his gavel so energetically as to break off the head and send it flying toward the defendant, thereby almost causing Sam to suffer the same fate he was accused of inflicting on his former employee. It was only a Chinaman that had been killed after all. Not jurisprudence’s shining hour to be certain but justice in fact had been served.

Kin Lam it turned out had been killed by an overeager tax collector who tracked him to Bodie after he had run away from his claim outside of Chinese Camp, trying escape paying the miner’s tax there,—Kin had refused to pay the Tongs protection money as well so it was open season on him. The tax collector had revealed aall this one night after having one too many drinks. Even after the truth about the murder came out, the guilty party was never prosecuted. Everybody thought it reasonable,

after all, the tax collector had a right to earn a living.

The day following the trial and the jury stampede Sam appeared in the doorway of the blacksmith shop and stables that belonged to Frank Wedertz. It was situated diagonally across from his vegetable store and was the largest and more importantly, the longest standing building in town. Having threatened publicly and repeatedly, with the aid of prudently displayed props, to brand and castrate any of the miners that so much as lit a match near him, Frank had managed to prevent the usual depredations and this benefit had extended to all the structures in the immediate vicinity including Sam's store.

"You go Comstock pretty quick too?" Sam inquired.

"Mebbe I am. Maybe I ain't." Wedertz replied cautiously quenching the carriage bolt he was hammering.

"Big strike there. Lotta silver"

"So I hear." Wedertz put down the hammer laconically.

"You go, come back mebbe stables gone, fire quick. No business, no silver." Sam lowered his eyes to convey that this was not a threat but an observation.

"You got a point there my slant-eyed friend." Frank said "Them miners'll set anything afire oncet they get roostered."

"Sam stay here. How about mebbe Sam buy your business? You go Comstock with plenty cash money grubstake. No worries!"

"Well I would need to get two hundred dollars solid for the place. And I get ta keep the horses."

Sam pulled two hundred dollars from his pocket right there and plunked it down on the anvil.

"Hot cash."

"Where'd you get that kindda dinero Sam Leon?" Frank said almost swallowing the nail he held between his teeth.

"Eggplants. –and Joss." He added, trying to avoid jinxing his luck.

The BowlaWhorEmporium

Wedertz had disappeared the following day, his place boarded up tight. No one seemed to know where he had gone but Sam had an amused look in his eye. The mystery was solved a month later when Sam Leon opened his new place on the spot under a bold banner he had printed up in San Francisco proclaiming 'Leon's BowlaWhorEmporium'. The nicely lettered paper sign in the window read 'Skookum breakfast, four bits'.

The miners were duly impressed even as several felt their shirt pockets for their supply of matches just out of habit, but the need for arson had been supplanted, at least temporarily to everyone's surprise, by what had been accomplished inside. This was no mere breakfast and booze joint. The humble former stable and blacksmith shop had been converted into a veritable Versailles Palace of crapulent distraction, incidental grooming and sexual satisfaction, replete with a two lane bowling alley in the former horse stalls out back, a barbershop, a recently tuned upright piano and a madam. Instead of furtively looking for the nearest support beam to dislodge, they just stood and gawked in mute appreciation. When they finally got the nerve to venture inside they found the drinks at the well appointed bar were on the house in honor of the grand opening. Sam also astutely offered free haircuts for the first ten customers. When these men emerged into the afternoon sun, well groomed, thoroughly drunk and still in possession of their 'flour', the bags of fine gold dust that served as spending money, even the skeptics among the onlookers were soon convinced that the place was remarkable and there to stay.

A week after the opening Sam set off to San Francisco via stage. There were two reasons for the trip. One was his need for a real barber chair he intended to order from Colorado and the other was his desire to speak personally with California Senator, David Broderick.

David Broderick had been one of the few California politicians friendly to the Chinese cause. Sam intended to provide a generous donation for him but arrived just in time to find that Broderick had been killed the day before in a senseless duel with the Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court, David Terry. Terry was a pro-slavery Democrat and had said of Broderick, a 'free soiler', "Perhaps, he does sail under the flag of Douglas, but it is the banner of the black Douglass whose name is

Frederick, not Stephen.” Broderick has responded calling Terry a useless scoundrel and the duel had been arranged to take place in Merced, south of San Francisco. Broderick’s pistol it turned out had a faulty trigger mechanism and had gone off prematurely into the ground. Terry had then calmly and with murderous accuracy proceeded to place a bullet in his right breast.

The funeral oration was about to be given by a local anti-slavery lawyer named Colonel Edward Dickinson Baker there in the Portsmouth Plaza. Sam arrived just in time to find a crowd gathered. The short of stature, well-dressed man standing over the coffin seemed lost in private contemplation, ignoring the restless, fidgeting crowd who gradually acquired the appearance of respectful attention through some alchemical reaction propagating through them, only then Baker’s voice rose from his breast like a thing precipitated from the assembled heavy earthbound elements, some homunculus, a golden being resolved from the leader dross of lazy attention, an eagle soared up into the clear air above the assembly and the voice seemed to stream down from heaven like an overflowing oblation, each present gaze following it like filings drawn in its wake by a thundering iron meteor.

“Fellow citizens the man whose lies before you was your Senator,— from the moment of his election he has been maligned, his motives his courage impeached, his honor assailed. It has been a system of lies one end to the other and that end lies here.” He paused, as if helpless to continue.

“What was his crime? Review his history, consider his public acts, weigh his private character, disclose his fondest desire before this unweeping pine incloses him forever and then judge! JUDGE!!!” (He thundered) “Judge between him and his enemies. Take for yourselves mantle of Solomon. This man died for one reason and one reason only, that he opposed the extension of slavery promoted by a corrupt administration onto a free and great territory, he opposed furthering that abominable plague and those who would force it on the unblemished countenance of a free people. Noise now the unblinking heavens with your cries!” The crowd dutifully erupted.

Sam had not understood all the words but initial the respectful silence of those who attended and the resulting furor that had erupted spoke eloquent volumes. The man speaking appeared to Sam now as some kind of wrathful Buddhist invocation, eyes ablaze, hair streaming like a mane flowing behind him, whipping the words from the creamy atmosphere, cloud mountains come down in their wake as

an avenging host, attendant to his fierce glance and each time he raised his fist as if to strike at the dying fall of a phrase, he instead let them fall limply again to his side like useless heavy hammers, freighted with his new forged sorrow, incapable of striking a blow despite the great white anger which infused them. It somehow reminded Sam of Wedertz with his horse shoeing.

After listening to Baker's entire speech, disheartened and disappointed, Sam had not followed the crowd heading toward Justice Terry's residence, bent on revenge. As a Chinese he would have been first to have his head caved in if the police were there. So, instead he made the circuit of the shops surrounding the square. From these he purchased stocks of scented soaps, shaving kits imported directly from Boston and some barber implements. Terry naturally was long gone anyway and probably smelled just fine. Broderick had been the last hope of the Chinese getting a fair shake in California for perhaps the remainder of that century. The mob did not need his help to point out the futility of seeking revenge.

Before leaving back to Bodie he had seen to ordering the bona-fide barber chair from Central City, Colorado. The chair was to be installed on a slightly raised platform across from the bar, framed by mirrors with brass handrails on three sides, mounted above polished countertops made from local granite, hand quarried from the Bodie hills and shaped by Chinese craftsmen.

When it arrived from the B.F. Quick company three weeks later, the crate boldly stenciled "Quicky Chair" occasioned a boisterous if misconstrued welcome. It was christened by Sam 'The Broderick' after the departed senator. He even found a use for the tall, empty crate after painting it and placing it upstairs, it was denominated the 'Quickie Box'. The miners could often be heard enquiring, "You 'a going to Sam's place for a quickie or for a Broderick?"

The chair itself was a sturdy, workmanlike leather and metal affair, but functioned more as a veritable regal throne situated at the end of the aptly named King Street invariably encouraging those who sat in it to demand they be treated like royalty. Facing it was the neat row of the baby blue tins marked "James B. William After Shave Talc" and "Genuine Yankee Soap" (both straight from Glastonbury

Connecticut). Sam had purchased these in San Francisco as well as various other bodily applications in avocado green decorated bottles with the sprinkler tops. On Tuesdays it was turned over to Frank Wedertz who had found a lucrative use for his blacksmith tongs having been hired by Sam as the house dentist. Presided over thus alternately by Wedertz and Esther Bryant the chair produced nearly as much income as the bar. They did an especially brisk business in Joseph Taite talc powder which the miners were told would improve both their bowling grip and their sexual prowess when applied to the 'eleventh digit'. When they ran out of talc Esther substituted tooth powder. The miners did not seem to notice the difference and the whores appreciated the minty freshness.

On the way home from San Francisco, Sam had taken an unplanned detour to Chinee Camp at Salvado to pick up some Joss sticks and also scraps of news about his homeland. He found the former Chinese enclave overrun by the Costa Rican immigrants busily gambling away their newly acquired gold. . The Costa Ricans had somehow managed thus far to evade the restrictions on foreign miners. The Tongs who had run the camp til now were somewhat in disarray with the two main rival factions struggling for control of the high stakes games. They found the Costa Ricans did not possess the ingrained fear and obedience they were used to obtaining automatically from the Chinese which made their situation rather precarious.

It was on this unplanned stopover he picked up his first (second if you counted Kin Lam) employee, a former enforcer for the Tongs named Ton-Wa who was suffering at the time from a terrible toothache. Despite several applications of medicinal herbs and inhalation of various unsavory burning concoctions the local Chinese doctor had prescribed, the pain had not abated. Sam invited him to accompany him back and Bodie to have his tooth extracted. He was so overwhelmed with gratitude when Wedertz pulled the tooth, that he had stayed on to become the bouncer for the establishment instead of returning to Chinee Camp and the feuding Triads. The BowlaWhorEmporium thereafter escaped arson on several occasions due to the constant vigilance of Tong-Wa along with the well-muscled Wedertz at his side thus the implied threat of some unnamed maxillary depredation to be exercised on any would be offenders emphasized by his blacksmith tongs. 'Two tongs per customer' was the saying, 'one spanks 'em the other yanks 'em'.

The one diversion Sam refused to provide was that of opium and he did not mind that his customers ended up elsewhere to exercise this particular vice and for which the other Chinese entrepreneurs, unlike Sam, would extend generous credit. Since the bars did not open til noon the second floor opium dens of Queen Street had quickly become the focal point for Sunday morning recreation. This was all fine with Sam except when they began inviting the white miners to participate their high-stakes Mahh Jong games which overflowed the weekend continuing sometimes well on into the next week. Sam had appeared in the doorway of one of these smoky venues on a Monday morning along with Ton-Wa at his side holding a mean looking hatchet. “Zhù shou! THAT ENOUGH!!” he growled. The invitations to non-Chinese to participate in the Mahh Jongg tournaments ceased quickly. If they wanted to play Mah Jongg they had travel the five miles to Aurora,-- at least on Sunday mornings.

Aurora thus had gained notoriety on several counts, not only as the Mah Jongg Capitol of Nevada but for the serendipitous appearance of its namesake in that year. Whether or not the Aurora Borealis observed that September was linked to extraordinarily punctual Chinese crime spree, or was even proximately linked to the unfortunate and deaths of Kin Lam and Kirlew Hume, is disputable, but there can be little doubt that its appearance in the night sky, first noticed by the survey party sent out by Orion Clemens to determine the state boundary line, contributed heavily to the decision to designate Aurora as the seat of Esmerelda County, Nevada.

Sam Warrington’s Last Whiskey

The 5' 4", dark-eyed Sam Warrington was not only head of the local Mine Worker’s Union, but was also on the personal payroll of Leland Stanford future governor of the state, president of the Bodie Consolidating Mining Company and on the board of the Bodie Lumber Company. Sam was by now well adept at playing both sides of the fence, providing Stanford with a steady steam of information regarding union activities while making sure any antipathy was directed away from the owners and toward the local Chinese population. Warrington was never observed to do any physical work himself.

He confided regularly to Esther during his manicures,

“I may not be a prospector but I sure as hell got prospects.”

He had been sitting at his usual table in the back of the BowlaWhoreEmporium when the stranger had ridden into town. The man who entered the bar was in a curiously hyper-alert state with a bullet hole and fresh powder burns on his pants leg. The presence of the powder burn raised suspicions immediately regarding the veracity of his next statement in several onlookers.

“Me and my pardner were jumped by a band of Pah-Yutes down by the Owens Valley near Bishop,”
“An jes where exactly is yore partner now?” Warrington asked, suspecting what the answer might be.
“Daid. He was kilt there up there on a bluff overlooking Owens Crik but I drug his body down to the soft wash next to the river and covered it with some scrub to keep the Injuns from takin’ his scalp. Then I hid near the river in some scrub till they passed. Seemed like it was two groups, one follerin’ the other. Both Pah-yute I guess. Good enough, I was still hid when the second bunch came thru,-- or they woulda kilt me too!”

Just as Sam was pretending to digest this obviously fabricated bit of news when a group of clearly agitated miners burst into the bar and accosted Warrington.

“You tole us we got a right to a free haircut once every three months as a benefit of joining the union and we is here to collect.” Sam barely looked up to acknowledge the impolitic intrusion. He nodded in Esther’s direction tapping the inside of his elbow, indicating that the miners could have the haircuts ‘off the cuff’, as it were. He would foot the bill from the pension fund.

“Quellin’ riots? Not the law are ya?”

“Jest a hobby.”

As the stranger seated himself warily at Warrington’s table, the formerly rowdy miners, now turned suddenly sheepish, lined up next to the chair where they were quickly tagged as salvageable, manageable and hopelessly overgrown, in rapid succession by Esther as if they were spring heifers at a cattle auction.

“No, you ain’t gettin’ no free talcum powder. The haircut’s free enough you cheap bastard. Get your filthy hands off’n me. And that too!”

The interruption handled Sam turned his attentions back to the stranger who was still obviously

impressed.

“Whyn’t you and me have a go. Take yore mind down to cogitatin’ the articles of profit and loss as can only sharpen the faculties.” Sam suggested, reaching for a deck of playing cards.

“Sure, sure,- what’s the game here?”

”Howz about poker?”

“Faro’s more my game I guess, but yeah, yeaah, I’ll settle for poker-- I reckon.”

“Still trail spooked Mr.---?”

“Feuerstool. I suppose. Ain’t really no prospector anyway. Sailor.”

“What was it sent you and your partner over Bishop way.”

“Bare coincidence I suppose, – just strolled in after this milk cow I spotted disappeared in the Tuff.”

“Milk. Now that’s remarkable. Only milk we got out here is squeezed straight outta the tit of a whiskey bottle.”

Neither man noticed when the Indian brave Tavibo rode straight up to the front door of the Bowlawhoremporium, scaring the daylights out of an original ‘forty niner’ who was dozing fitfully on the steps as a large bubble of iridescent snot expanded and contracted with his breathing. A moment later a spherical object in dusty deerskin bag came careening in and rolled up directly under the table where Sam and Mandelbrot Feuerstool were seated, the initial impact causing the prodigious bubble of pulsating snot to implode startling the man again from his fitful slumber. Tavibo then retreated to the bluff where six Paiute braves sat waiting patiently for a reply to this obvious challenge.

“Goddam Injuns cain’t bowl fer shit.”

“Naw they can’t. Best stick to LaCrosse ”

“Fy’dollars, by gold.”

“See your five and raise you ten.” Sam slammed a coin on the table assiduously ignoring the object that had recently come to rest at his feet. Feuerstool had suspected immediately that the bag under the table contained not a bowling ball but the severed head of his former partner Kirlew Hume.

As Sam by now had surmised, the two had not been set on by Indians as the man sitting across from

him asserted. He in fact had shot his partner, cut off his head with a strand of telegraph wire, tossing the body into the river and burying the head under some nearby sagebrush after shooting himself through the pants leg to make it look like an attack. He would have most likely escaped without incident had he not the misfortune to have committed this crime on sacred Indian ground. They had followed him the fifty miles into town with the evidence of his crime in the deerskin bag.

The bar had fallen suddenly silent. Even the faint insectivorous ‘snip, snip’ of the scissors had ceased. Feuerstool was first to break the silence.

“You have the appearance of a plain, honest man,” Realizing now that the display of bowling prowess had been an inevitable signal that the law was likely on the way he had stood carefully removing several items from beneath his hat.

He handed Warrington the watch he had taken from his dead partner, the smallish bag of gold nuggets and a slightly damaged Daguerreotype.

“I just got a few things in this world and I don’t want none o’ them sequestered in sheriff’s evidence,- You hold ‘em for me. You hold ‘em n’ I’ll be eternally grateful, ‘n an as for the gold, there’s plenty more of that if you know where to look, which I assure you, I do.”

Warrington was not impressed. He heard exaggerated claims of rich strikes just about every week from some hollow eyed, fatback slathered miners who had drifted into the saloon seeking a grubstake or a beer.

“I cain’t just take no money but tell you what, I’ll take ‘em as a contribution to the union election committee campaign fund, how’zat” hurriedly shoving the unexpected windfall into his boot and the photograph into his vest pocket.

With that the Bodie sheriff burst in wiping his mouth with the back of his hand despite the fact he had a large, red, checked napkin in the other. He was clearly irritated.

“I’ll goddamned if I’m goin’ to toss my breakfast over this parcel of horseshit again so if’n you know somethin, one of you’ all better step up now. See that band of damn Paiutes out there on the ridge? One’ovum claims one of you kill’t a man on their land over toward the Owen Valley. Now I don’t

s'pose the truth is as unwelcome in your mouth as my forty-five so I recommend you speak up if you know somethin'. What's in that bag'll prove what you is givin out of it but if'n it don't one of you' fellers better turn yourself in before you get them and me much angrier je's on principle."

"What the heyell do you think you're doin'? You ain't got no jurisdiction over no murder in the Owen Valley." The sheriff who had been appointed by the California side in the disputed election had been drinking all the while at the bar now turned to face him. When he stood up anyone would have mistaken him for the twin of the man with the checked napkin. The same features, the same brush moustache.

"Any killin' there clearly took place in California. I'll thank you to step aside and let me have my proper play before you go tossin' anything."

"I will not step aside, as this here place is under my authority according to Governor Nye." The man with the checked napkin said flushing, tossing the napkin to the floor and confronting the other man who had stood up, thrusting out his barrel chest. The dispute might have evolved to actual gunplay had not the issue been rendered moot when Feuerstool picked up the bag containing the severed head and flung in the direction of the bickering lawmen knocking both 'ass over garters' right before he leapt through the window out onto the porch. The bullet hole in his breeches caught on a nail in the window frame so while he made it entirely through the window, his pants did not.

"Nekkid launch." The now fully awake forty niner observed, attempting to wipe the remainder of snot off his face but succeeding only in smearing it.

On witnessing the two sheriffs' tumble to the floor, the miners lined up by the barber chairs had yelled almost in unison,

"Strike!"

"Heyy?!" Cherokee Liz protested as the escaping man grabbed a recently re-stitched pair of red silk long johns from the back of her cart before leaping onto a horse and taking off to the northeast.

Even after their unitary exclamation of approbation the miners lining the barber station had been watching with intense interest the outcome of the contretemps between the two remarkably similar looking lawmen, who might have been twins, which dispute had pointedly reminded them that both they and their claims might also in fact be in fact in some sort of legal limbo at least until the boundary

dispute was clearly settled. Arguments had broken out. By the time the red faced sheriffs had recovered their feet and made it through the boisterous, argumentative crowd, the underdressed but fleet Feuerstool was long gone, over the ridge east of town and out of sight. Neither seemed inclined to pursue the man. The California sheriff could claim he had 'gone over Nevada way'. That was just fine with him. As for the Nevada lawman, with the Indians in the picture, the likely victim here not definitively a candidate for white man's justice, clearly he was more concerned that his breakfast of fatback bacon, fried eggplant and the fact that his stewed beans were getting cold than reasserting his political prerogatives.

A Hole in One

It had been five hours since Sam Warrington, issued the call, "Get your scabby asses down to the union hall. We got some business!" With his left thumb he was nervously pressing the smooth back of the pocket watch against the smooth inside of his vest while the other hand received the attentions of Esther, getting the full 'Broderick' as it were. By the time the miners had reassembled at the union hall stroking the hammers of their Colts the news that the newly revived Bodie Lumber Company was planning to improve the road from the Mono Hills to Bodie to transport lumber had permeated their conversation. Sam finally sauntered in himself still admiring the artistic job done on his nails.

"Bodie Lumber done decided to hire only Chinee to build their damn road." This was the news he had been greedily hoarding all morning

"They can't do that. It's un-American. I got a pound o' black powder'l set 'em straight "

"Now gentlemen, don't go blowin' up the Bodie stamping mill,-- that won't do no one no good. We need to meet this challenge in a unifiery fashion. We need to formulate a-yuh general opinion by committee."

"N just so you know. We ain't no Unitarians, we are miners whose opinion gets expressed at the end of a six-inch fuse."

"I ain't constaintootin' no dang committee. I say blow'em all to kingdom come!"

"We should constitute a subcommittee to deal with this proper. A Miners & Owners Committee of

Racial Equivalency. They should be the ones to determine a just means to deal with this outrage.”

It was Leland Stanford standing in the back of the room calling for formation of a committee so it could not be ignored.

“What’s he doin’ here?”

“Consultant. Black Jack, Crooked Bill and Elijah, you are hereby, herewith and hereafter elected committee members. The rest of you get the hell out till we’ all figger out how to handle this here in a civilized manner.” Warrington pronounced this in a tone which did not brook discussion but clearly evinced his own irritation at Stanford’s open interference.

“Shoot the muthafuckin’ celestials.” One miner who had been too drunk to notice that additional comments were not being welcomed, erupted anomalously.

“That man’s right. We ain’t vigilantes. Leave that to the San Franciscans. We are a union and we act through parliamentary rules. We don’t go off half-cocked and start tearing up the town.” Warrington put the imprimatur on all this in a tone that suggested finality.

“I move to consecrate this committee to the hereafter and fund them from the dues.”

“I’m blowed. No vigilantes. Nossiree!”

“Shuttup there!”

“Second!”

“Aye,—blowed double. So fuck yerself.”

“You fuck yerself,—sideways with two dicks.”

The afternoon was growing warm and unusually humid. The unhappy, overdressed miners were steaming like dim sums in wicker baskets. After they approved the motion and filed out of the union hall most had snuck right back to the bar to quench their fast returning thirst. All this talking didn’t suit them. Those tapped for the ad hoc committee remained standing in front of the podium, nervously fingering their floppy felt hats, eager to go as well, but Warrington was not quite finished with them.

“Don’t be igner’nt. It ain’t the lumber company owners which is yore enemy,”—he lectured as if to children, “it’s the damn Chinees stealing jobs. Working for low wages. Breakin’ the law, sending our good gold up the Yellow River in the belly of a China Clipper. Can’t blame the owners for hiring out

at the lowest figger. Stanford's only here ta help."

The touchstones of the racial harangue rounded each base predictably as in a baseball game. He finally released the group now drenched in sweat who dutifully filed out, looking forward to the same sartorial, kegulous and erotic relief at the BowlaWhorEmporium that their comrades had already been enjoying for the last hour.

"Take this here box to Sam Leon, tell' im we're gonna need a wagon load of Dupont B."

The impromptu meeting taking place under the somewhat skeptical but watchful gazes of the Paiute and Kutzadika still camped up on the hill above Bodie left them under the mistaken impression that the miners were intent on organizing a posse to set off after the murderer of Kirlew Hume.

"We wait now, watch now." Tavibo counseled.

"White men do not carry justice in their shiny boxes."

"We wait now!"

Blowin' Off Steam

Despite Sam's urging of tolerance, the irate miners had paused on the way back to the saloon long enough to pull down the newly reopened offices of the Bodie Lumber Company consequently, when the committee, minus Warrington himself, had readjourned at Sam Leon's for some refreshment, they were in an exceptionally self congratulatory mood. The committee members had promptly rented several bowling balls with the union funds and set about 'consideratin a stratergy' for dealing with the 'uppity Chinees'. Sam Leon, on seeing them converging had quickly sensed something unusual was up. He had heard them cursing the 'damn Celestials' from up the street.

"Ton-wa! You go now Mono Lake pretty damn quick. Find Machin. Tell him and Chinese, we got plenty trouble here." Ton-wa set out for Mono but made a detour first to the union hall where he had encountered Sam Warrington. He was alone now, congratulating himself on how he had managed the entire affair, searching for defects in his recent manicure. It was not the first time he had made trouble for the Chinese but it would be the last as Ton-Wa's own recently styled fingers curtailed his supply of either Nevada or California air.

“Now Ton-Wa don’t have to rush no more.”

The decision on the part of the Bodie Lumber Company to solely utilize Chinese labor while, no doubt guided by other interests had been a prudent one. The Chinese were not only industrious but also expert timber cutters and they would work at half the day rate of their white counterparts. Mixing crews was not an option as it would unquestionably lead to violence. Once the road was finished, the crews could be set to cutting logs up in the hills for the mill in Mono.

By the time the duly constituted “M.O.C.E.R.E.” had spent the last of their voted funds on booze and ninepins, it seemed they had forgotten the original object of their malice and had sublimated their simmering anger in the more quantifiable violence of bowling.

“I’m throwing a Chinaman’s ball.”

“What’s that?”

“Some hung low. Dang,—seven ten split. Coyote Piss!”

“That’s a good one!”

Bowling required the removal of boots and shoes and in some cases even socks if they were suspected of harboring a case of ‘Buffalo Boot Monkey’ as a particularly virulent strain of foot fungus was called. This had the added inducement of revealing any emergency stash called ‘shoe cake’ which many miners kept stashed in their socks and also greatly increasing the sales of talc powder. The strict ‘no boots’ policy had contributed to a steep decline in violent incidents as it seemed unsporting to shoot somebody in bowling shoes. Sam’s insistence that they check their guns along with their boots had rendered bowling (if you did not count fucking) the only sporting activity in Mono not entirely or partly based on munitions.

After a couple of hours of this the miners had begun to recall their original purpose and Warrington’s exhortations. Like loaves of sourdough bread, their original animus, collapsed with the clattering pins was slowly rising again in the warm atmosphere of the bar.

‘Fuck this place, let’s go to Mono to teach them damn Chinees to steal our jobs ‘n insult our whores’!

Attempting to delay them, with calculated exuberance Sam Leon had announced munificently, “Free hair cut for any you swingin’ dicks who bowl eighty-five or bettah. Plus free game!” Most of the miners had only looked up momentarily from their whiskey or beer, vaguely interested at the offer. “Free shave!” Sam added resignedly glancing at a Esther who head was already wagging in a pre-probative negative. This proved sufficient re-engage their flagging interest. Accompanied by whoops and hollers they re-descended on the abandoned bowling balls.

The dough had been punched down momentarily but the yeast fueled excitement proved short lived when they quickly realized that in their present state of inebriation the chance of any of them bowling an eighty-five was slim to none and the subterfuge collapsed entirely when they ran out of shaving soap and an enterprising barberess attempted to use latrine cakes instead which had the unintended consequence of sobering them up enough to reach the conclusion that Sam was watering the free whisky. With Ton-Wa suddenly nowhere in sight, some form of wanton destruction seemed imminent and what form it would take was determined with the forty niner who had migrated inside to continue dozing arose from his torpor, yelling,

‘Come on boys, let’s go down to Mono and show them who’s boss.’ At this the half shaven mob stumbled out into the street, whooping, cursing, shooting their guns wildly in the air. Halfway up the street one turned and managed to pitch a bowling ball through the front window of Sam’s old store. ‘Strike!’ he yelled with glee.

“Strike!” the others echoed breaking out in hoots, but not drunk enough to suspend seeking something relatively blunt to slap. The exultation of the miners was understandable given that this was the only successful strike that the Bodie-Aurora Mineworker’s Union had conducted since their inception three years earlier. Had Ton-Wa still been there instead of at the union hall with Sam Warrington, someone else would have paid dearly but by the time the miners returned to the saloon, Ton-Wa was already halfway to Mono Lake.

Sam had prudently hid their mules in what was left of the stables behind the saloon, so it seemed momentarily they had no means of transportation. They began scouring the town for wagons and

finding they had circumambulated once again in front of the BowlaWhoreEmporium. They now tried again with a second bowling ball to smash the plate glass they missed as the ball bounced harmlessly from the porch barely skirting poor Aurora Whorealis who was curled up on the porch in the spot recently vacated by the expectorating forty niner. This sent Aurora wobbling off into the night, yipping in a dislocated ghostly fashion like a detached wagon wheel looking for its former creak.

The miners continued their disjointed and warped trajectory down the main street which was not surprising as they were being led by Crooked Bill Ferguson who, due to a gimpy leg tended to travel in ellipses. This eventually proved advantageous as their primarily circuitous path led them to the rear entrance of Sam Leon's where they found a wagon already hitched groaning under the load of what looked like a newly arrived sixty-gallon barrel of whiskey standing upright next to a keg of black powder.

"Lookee here. Jackpot!"

"That oughtta curl their short hairs."

"Don't tech that booze. It belongs to the committee." Bill cautioned.

Reinvigorated, yelling and whooping they set off toward the Chinese community at Mono Lake followed at a discreet distance now by the two Kutzadika that had been watching them the entire time from the bluff and who were determined to see the 'posse' deliver justice for the murder committed on their lands. Aurora Whorealis had likewise taken up a discreet station behind them just outside of town.

The gods were also having a party. In the distance over Mono lightning was crackling, a brutally crisp argument of light with itself across the cowering sky, outwashing gusts from the brooding storm salved the parched air with intermittent clots and caressing sheets of dark moisture, flagons of wine cast from somewhere above the high dessert, errant toasts of the unseen celebrants. The dark thunderheads convoked, glowering, cast off dowagers scourged from the midst of fading debutantes swathed in pastel. The brewing storm did not seem to discourage the miners in the least.

By the time the two wagons were four miles out from Bodie, their occupants had already begun eying

the whisky barrel amorously. Crooked Bill finally, unable to contain himself, took out a hatchet and staved in the barrel head resulting in a general rush to scoop out whiskey using their boots. This was when they first realized now was that the nuggets they had stashed in their socks were no longer there. A few began calling on the drovers to turn around and go back to Sam Leon's to investigate. A vigorous debate had ensued splitting them into two contending factions.

"Turn 'em round. That damn Chinaman, gave me back the wrong socks! "

"Naww!"

"I said turn this here buggy round! And I ain't foolin'" He reached toward his revolver.

"Give'im a snootfull of the Dewpont 'B'. That'll settle their water."

The miners quickly divided into two camps one calling for a return to Bodie the other insisting they press on to Mono. As the sky drew darker those in favor of turning back, occupying as they did the wagon with both the whiskey barrel and the barrel of black powder were realizing they held a distinct tactical advantage.

"Toss it here. I got me some dry matches. We'll put a scare in 'em."

Things thus were already getting somewhat dicey when they encountered Cherokee Liz standing in the middle of the road waving her arms and shouting angrily, black braids were flying out behind her like angry exclamation points in the gathering gloom. The air was wet as a tigress's tit, but as if embarrassed by the impending rain, not a drop had yet appeared on the ground.

"Put down that down." She yelled at the miner holding the already fused whiskey bottle filled with the blasting soda. The miner sheepishly complied.

An Immovable Object and an Unflappable Force

After murdering Sam Warrington and stuffing him in the whisky barrel in back of the saloon Ton-Wa had set out to warn the Chinese at Mono of the imminent danger. He too had first encountered Cherokee Liz on the way heading toward Bodie with a wagonload of vegetables. She had, at Ton-Wa's request planted herself here as a roadblock.

Even at thirty-eight she was a handsome, imposing figure of a woman and with her more than three

hundred pound bulk seemed to block the entire road, a culpable force of nature. For a moment the clouds parted to the west. The sun was just glancing the top of the Sierras. It reflected brightly off the metallic strands spun into her cotton blouse. She also had a large mother of pearl button that topped a knitting needle stuck thru her chonga knot. She had owned this button since her days at the missionary school back in St. Louis. She now removed the knitting needle and with it caught the fading afternoon light. With an astounding skill she wielded the reflection like a weapon, using the shiny needle head to focus it one by one on the miners' eyes. They shrunk back, black spots suddenly clouding their vision,

"I'm blind. I'm blind! I got cataracts!"

Cherokee Liz had managed to bully the mule and her vegetable wagon off the worn path and alongside the large rock formation about four miles outside Monoville where Gunfight now contentedly browsed the Sacaton grass and a nearby Green Ephedra bush.

"You pull up there! Pull up- I said!"

The startled horses drew up to a halt next to her empty vegetable cart.

"Get out of the way," Bill brandished his boot as though it were a weapon albeit an obviously ineffective one.

"We got official business in Mono, union business!"

"What union business?! You limp dick bastard! Blowin' up women and children or yourselves. You'd better get your drunk asses on back to Bodie!"

"You are one handsome woman *mi querida*," said Crooked Bill now dropping the match he had in his hand too long and shaking it.

"We gotta take steps for what is our'n."

"Shove it up your stopes, Bill Ferguson."

"We come to teach the damn Chinamen not to take our damn jobs!" Crooked Bill persisted

"You couldn't teach a dog to lick its own ass if he was shitting chicken. you lazy sons-a-bitches. That snake Sam Warrington shouldda got you the goddam jobs hisself."

“Whadayou mean!”

“The lumber company done offered them in the Bridgeport paper help wanted for two weeks and not one o’ you fools answered. More’n likely cause none o’ you worthless bastards got use for a newspaper ‘cept for wipin’ yore ass. Warrington, now he can read and couldda tole you all that but he didn’t, did he, so whdusszat tell ya.” She held up a copy now of the Bridgeport paper causing them to fall into an embarrassed silence.

Crooked Bill, taking advantage of the sudden abashed quietude and to distract from his own embarrassment at Liz’s lambasting yelled with inexplicably forceful prescience.

“Say! Where is ole Sam? He’ll set this half-breed chola straight!”

If Liz had a gun instead of a knitting needle she would have shot the man but the outburst could not have occurred at a more propitious moment. The one-armed miner named McMillan was becoming increasingly incensed. He was in fact the only man among them who could read and by sheer luck was one of the few occupants Liz had as yet not blinded with the needle glare. He reached for the paper.

“Say, where is old Sam anyway?”

As he leaned over the staved in barrel head, MacMillan had turned deathly pale, like a Mono Lake brine shrimp. One of the other miners now peeked over the side to see what had upset him. Inside the three quarters full barrel was Sam Warrington curled up like a hank of ribbon.

“Well I heard ole Sam say he was due for a bath this month.” He remarked snidely and cautiously lifting an unresponsive coiffed hand from the barrel.

“That ain’t no dew.”

“Throw a match in and we’ll see if he’s due or not.”

Don’t Bring Gunfight to a Bull Fight

The last remark had induced general laughter just as Gunfight let out an Ephedra fueled symphony of flatulence startling several of those who just now had seemed to noticed the stenciling on the second

barrel which said “Dupont Blasting Powder”. This quickly devolved into a general hilarity and sense of relief that they had chosen not to attempt to set fire to the barrel with the black powder in it. Two of the occupants of the other wagon now clambered over to investigate. This caused the axle to snap sending the rear of the wagon crashing to the ground and disgorging Sam’s body half way, spilling most of the whiskey onto the ground in the process, and leaving the remaining occupants of the buckboard somewhat disoriented. Both barrels in fact were now perched precariously leaning over the rear of the wagon the Dupont barrel slowly leaking its contents onto the ground as Warrington remained extending from the lip of the upended whisky barrel like in a soggy jack-in-the box.

“Well, I’ll be a boned rattler hatband. It is Warrington all right.” Bill Ferguson pronounced as if anyone needed further confirmation of the fact.

“Soaked!” Observed another.

“Whoeee-smells like greasewood in the rain.”

“Pickled! In snake piss if you ask me!” This remarked was punctuated with spitting a large glob of tobacco. At this point Gunfight sauntered over and began lapping up the spilt whisky which had mixed with some of the other barrel’s mixture of Sodium Nitrate, Charcoal and Sulphur.

“Don’t be ignitin’ none o’ that mule’s farts unless you want to be covered in asshole!” McMillan cautioned.

“I’m already covered with assholes.”

This was enough to inspire Crooked Bill who had had quite enough of the confusing politics and now just wanted to blow something up. He pried open the box of fuses and taking a few out began chasing Gunfight around attempting to insert one into his anus after lighting it with his cigar.

The uncooperative mule began racing in the opposite direction and the combination of Bill’s limp and the mono-ocularity of the mule locked them into a fierce figure eight of flying hooves and sputtering fuses which when both arrive at the vertex simultaneously would occasion a flailing congress of thrusts and hooves focused on the uncooperative mule’s hindquarters which would launch it once again into another rotary circuit the, the sudden lack of resistance likewise impelling Bill forward to perform his half of the split infinitive.

And so this went on for a while, to the miners' amusement but as the sun went down it was clear the incident was taking on a rather disagreeably dilatory cast. Some, had by now puzzled out the news article and were thus no longer certain as to Warrington's motives and they began to suspect perhaps Warrington had somehow intentionally conspired to spy on using the subterfuge of stashing himself in the barrel not realizing it was filled with whisky. After going thru three of the ten fuses in the box Crooked Bill had finally given up while the mule eyed him suspiciously from the Sacaton grass. The miners in the meanwhile had unceremoniously roped the heavy dripping corpse and yanked him fully out of the barrel leaving him on the side of the road hoping that the extraordinarily resilient Warrington was not in fact dead, but rather just dead drunk.

"Leave 'm here to sleep it off."

"Who or what'n the hell is that!" Liz yelled at them over her shoulder as she struggled with the obstreperous Gunfight, unwilling now to approach any closer.

"Bodie Pickle!"

"Hyaah!,-" and with that they disappeared in a cloud of alkali dust. The wind was blowing up the dust, obscuring the moon so they did not get far before they decided to pull over and wait til morning.

When the contingent of vengeful miners finally reached the small settlement across from Negit early the next morning they were treated to a sore disappointment. The alkali stormn had delayed them until it was too late and through the occasional parting of the white dusty curtain it was clear they had been warned and the place evacuated, the Chinese occupants having already fled to Paoha Island using the flat keeled boat, *Rocket* they had bought from the defunct bird guano company. Most of the sobered up miners went sheepishly back to their claims in the Sierra the following day while a few remained at the abandoned village waiting for the Chinese to return so they might wreak their committee sanctioned justice. They were doomed to be disappointed as the Chinese did not return. They remained on mostly remained on rocky bare volcanic outcropping, raising a new crop of extraordinarily handsome babies up amidst the gull shit and the friable diatomaceous alluviumata, all

at a safe remove from the unpredictable wrath of the white miners.

When the rest of the booze had finally run out the remaining miners set off back to Bodie, coming across the rig with the broken axle outside Monoville. Sam was nowhere in sight but it did not take them long to discover his body into the mesquite brush completely naked but with no other bruises on him except for a black eye clearly made glaringly apparent by the deathly pallor. There no longer any doubt he was not just sleeping one off.

“Hey I don’t remember him smilin’ like that when we tossed ‘im.” one of the miners observed sanguinely, spitting.

“I guess Cherokee Liz done sent him to heaven.“

“Chhc-chyeahr!”

When Ton-Wa returned from Mono Sam had taken him aside.

“What happen to that sack of shit Warrington and more important, my barrel whisky” He demanded heatedly.

I don’t know, maybe some kinda bad accident happen.” Ton-Wa whispered conspiratorily.

When the sheriff concluded Sam’s death was a case of accidental drowning, that ended matters.

The Chinese, would never be employed for the Bodie Mono Turnpike project. They were instead used to create the eventual small gauge rail line that ran between Mono and Bodie to which fell the task of transporting most of the lumber anyway. They had the foresight this time to inform the Tongs well in advance of their employment as well as their aversion to working on Tuesdays. Their families remained on Negit while the men made daily trips to work on the line and to tend the abandoned gardens and to retrieve water from the spring in the adjacent hills. Still ferrying laundry, lumber and manure across the generally calm waters of the lake each day was the dependable manure carrier *‘Rocket*.

It had not exactly been the retreat of Washington’s army from Brooklyn, or the evacuation of Dunkirk,

but to the Chinese residents of Monoville they had carried out, at least in their minds, an equally honorable historic strategic retreat under dire of circumstances. That the evacuation was in fact notable and memorable and of general interest was attested to by the inclusion by Ella Cain, the eminent historian of Mono County who both eloquently and somewhat insensitively described the departure of the Chinese as they had abandoned their tidy gardens and little shacks on the shores of Mono Lake, in her 'History of Mono County' with the single expressive line, 'Mono Lake had never seen the likes of them gibbering Chinks'.