

Fool's Gold

'How's the claim goin' Irish?' asked Lucky Ron, 'You been diggin' round the clock. Got anything?'

Seamus slowly straightened his aching back, wiped stinging sweat from his face, and stood as tall as he could. He stepped into the blazing heat from his tunnel and stretched his cramped arms.

'Not too bad Lucky,' said Seamus grinning broadly, 'I reckon she's given me just enough to get meself a little woman. I've been wanting company since coming to the diggings last year.'

'You can get a woman any day of the week,' said Ron, 'Down the native camp near the river.'

Seamus kicked a clump of mud onto Ron's feet. He jumped back laughing.

'I'm not after a ten-penny doxy. I want a wife,' explained Seamus, 'Sure I've enough saved to get a shanty and the bits and bobs a woman needs to keep house.'

'You'll have to be the lucky one, Irish. There's one woman for a hundred fellas here.'

'I've been saving,' said Seamus, tapping the side of his nose with a grubby index finger, 'If I have a home with all the trappings, well, I've got a head start over other blokes.'

'True! Well, best of luck to you then Irish,' said Ron as he turned to leave, 'Invite me for afternoon tea once you get settled.'

Seamus laughed as Ron's hulking body walked away. He'd been a good friend and shown him the ropes here on the diggings, particularly who to keep in with, and who to avoid.

Seamus had kept his nose clean, head down and nose to the grindstone.

Taking a long swig of tepid water from the wallaby-skin water bag, he looked around the diggings. Every square inch was being worked, and few trees had escaped being felled for timber or removed from a claim.

I must've been mad. Sure I caught gold fever and jumped boat to Melbourne town, all the way from Dublin. I'd not do it again knowing the hardship, heat and blasted hard work just to pull a nugget or two. A full year I've been hacking away, and still not likely to send money back to Ma.

The clang of iron on stone, never ending arguments and jangling of horses traces filled the air. Even at night some poor bastard would be chipping away, desperate to pull something from the earth. Something to feed him and get him to tomorrow. Something to prove that joining the thousands rushing here wasn't in vain.

Seamus had seen many stumble and fall, usually into booze and unscrupulous "friends" who would relieve a down-and-out miner of his last coin, then drop him like a millstone to rot in destitution.

'Not me,' he declared to the world, 'I'm going to make it. And if I don't strike it rich, at least I'll have a lovely lass beside me.'

Grinning, he nodded to a nearby miner. He shook his head at Seamus' endless optimism but didn't break rhythm in his digging. Must keep going. Luck could reveal itself in the next shovel of dirt, a stone breaking apart or in the bottom of a pan.

Seamus took up his shovel again and returned to his tunnel. Instead of visiting Molly's drinking tent for a tot of whatever she had to hand, as he usually did on a Friday night, he bathed in the river, and brushed off his jacket and hat. He was going to town to find a wife.

Shy of going all the way into Ballarat where the hotels attracted the corporate mine managers, landowners and the upper class, he was aiming for the Southern Star a mile off. More middle class, frequented by store keepers, shop assistants and the like. More his sort of people, and the venue where he hoped a young lady might be passing her afternoon over tea and dainties.

Seamus whistled as he made his way down the busy track, frequently stepping off the road to avoid the coaches coming to and from Melbourne, the swathe of newcomers eager to make their fortunes, and the endless trickle of those leaving the area having decided to cut their losses. One side of the road was full of expectation, the other filled with defeat.

He nodded and passed the time of day with everyone, alternately receiving smiles or blank stares in return. But nothing could ruin his mood today. He was going to find a wife.

The Southern Star was heaving with people. Seamus scanned the saloon bar. All men, as he expected, but no more couth than Molly's drinking tent. He dusted off his clothes and smiling, entered the snug where ladies were permitted to drink tea and fill their bellies with cakes and the last week's gossip.

Seamus' smile faltered as he stepped in the well appointed small lounge.

The only lady here must be fifty, and in mourning black. Where's the young ones in need of a husband?

Tipping his hat to the lady he made a hasty retreat, and hunched over as he made the thirty minute trudge back towards his tent.

Well, I didn't expect that. Here's me, ready willing and able to take on a wife, and not one lass in sight. What's to be done now?

Approaching their makeshift town, and with his head down, Seamus didn't notice the small black shoes until he bumped into their owner.

'I'm sorry madam, totally my own fault,' he automatically apologised as he looked up.

'Begods you're beautiful.'

The young Chinese girl gave a half smile, bobbed a curtsey and continued on her way.

Seamus watched this Asian goddess glide across the dusty road, then followed at what he thought was a safe distance. Nothing could distract him from discovering where this angel lived, until he was shoved aside by an older Chinese woman.

'No follow. You leave alone,' she said, 'Girl no for you dirty digging man.'

Seamus rubbed his bruised arm, but continued to watch their progress. Ahead was a new arrival's tent with buckets and tubs outside, where both his angel and the woman entered. A hastily painted sign announced it to be Madam Rosie's Laundry.

Lucky Ron walked up behind Seamus and clamped an arm around his shoulder, 'So have you got your wife yet Irish?'

'I may just have seen her,' he replied, 'There's a lovely Chinese girl in there. I'm going to get to know her.'

'Think again Irish, the Chinese come here to wash, clean, and make money. They won't take kindly to your attention,' said Ron gently. It was clear Seamus had lost his heart within a few seconds and with no conversation.

'I'll see you at Molly's later, yes?'

asked Seamus as he continued over the road to the laundry.

‘Yes mate, you can tell me all about it later,’ said Ron as he shook his head, a wry smile on his face. He’d never seen his mate in love, or was it lust? And while he’d give him loads of stick, he hoped Seamus would not do anything stupid, or get hurt.

Seamus approached the tent flap where Madam Rosie was sorting sheets and blankets.

‘Good afternoon Madam,’ said Seamus in his best voice, ‘I would like to meet the young lady, if that’s OK with you.’

‘Show money,’ demanded Rosie.

Seamus delved into his pocket and drew out three five shilling notes and a few coins. Madam Rosie took one of the notes and gestured for him to go to the back area. He eagerly walked through, ignoring that she’d taken a full week’s earnings. Beyond the piles of washing sat his angel.

‘Hello, I’m Seamus, and you are the most beautiful girl in the world,’ he gushed.

She simply smiled and glanced at him from her downcast eyes. He sat opposite her and took her hand. She didn’t respond, but then she didn’t pull away either. Seamus was thrilled.

‘I’ll talk to Madam Rosie, and come and see you again,’ said the smitten Seamus, ‘You’re too lovely to remain here.’

He had forgotten that a life with him would be infinitely dirtier, harsher and fraught with failure, but it didn’t matter.

I have to see her again.

He remained holding her hand and gazing at her until Madam Rosie came through.

‘You go now. Time up,’ she declared, shooing him out of the tent, ‘Come tomorrow if wish.’

‘But what’s her name?’

‘She called Yu Ren Jin,’ said Madam Rosie, ‘Stupid white man.’

Seamus retreated backwards from the tent, turned and leapt into the air with a wild “Huzzah”, startling those nearby and making a horse rear up in fright. Clapping his hands, Seamus ran to his tent and threw his good jacket and hat into a sack. Grabbing water bag and shovel, he strode to his claim and worked until sunset.

‘I’ll earn her trust and get to know her, then I’ll marry her,’ he said walking back to his tent.

Quickly swilling his face, he made his way to Molly’s where Lucky Ron was waiting.

‘So how’d it go?’ he called loudly, seeing Seamus enter the drinking tent. ‘Everyone, this man’s decided to take a wife. Only she doesn’t know yet.’

The other patrons raised their tankards and laughed. Seamus took it in good fun and slapped Ron on the arm.

‘Never a truer word may have been said,’ he said, ‘She is the most beautiful creature.’

‘More beautiful than our Molly here?’ asked Ron, earning a flick on the hand with a towel as Molly smiled and glanced from Ron to Seamus. ‘Not possible. Our Molly is one in a million.’

‘Don’t you forget it,’ Molly grinned, still looking at Seamus, ‘Who else would put up with your palaver?’

Seamus accepted his drink with a nod, and spent the next twenty minutes extolling the virtues of Yu Ren Jin to anyone who would listen.

‘Might try her myself if she’s that good,’ called another miner.

Seamus bristled, slammed his tankard on the makeshift bar and clenched his fists. Ron saw the anger rise in his friend and was quick to grasp his shoulders and get him outside.

‘Settle down mate,’ said Ron, still pinning Seamus’ arms to his sides. ‘It’s all in fun. No-one’s going to push their way in.’

Seamus glared at Ron, shook himself free and stormed off into the dark. Ron returned to the bar where Molly looked up, curious to see this side of Seamus. She’d known him almost since he arrived, and he and Ron were regular Saturday night patrons, never drinking too much and always funning with their banter.

‘He’ll be right in the morning,’ said Ron, ‘It’s not often a man finds an angel in this place.’

Molly smiled and left Ron with his drink staring through the flap and out into the night.

Seamus rose early, still angry from the comment last night. He made his way to the laundry.

‘Madam, I would like to see Yu Ren Jin,’ he said.

‘Money first,’ she demanded.

He handed over another note and walked through to the back.

‘My lovely girl,’ he effused, grasping her hand and kissing it, ‘I want to look after you, and for you to look after me and no-one else. Will you consider it? Please?’

Madam Rosie watched him, thought quickly that this could mean good money. She’d brought the girl with her to start a brothel, but finding these were illegal, opened a laundry. What goes on out the back can be hidden, and the girl was too talented to wash clothes.

‘Oy, white digging man,’ she called, ‘You want see Yu Ren Jin only? It cost much money.’

‘How much?’ asked Seamus, not even looking at Madam Rosie.

‘Ten pounds,’ she stated bluntly, ‘No money, no see again.’

Ten pounds. That's a lot, but she's worth it. I've got five pounds saved, and if I go up river, further than others I'm sure I can do it. Could sell my claim too and get another pound.

Seamus lifted Yu Ren Jin's downcast head and stared into the limpid pools of her brown eyes. A hint of a smile and he was lost.

'Done,' he called, then spoke more softly to the girl, 'Wait for me my dear love, I'll be back and we'll be together.'

He kissed her hand again, and she placed hers delicately on his cheek. Madam Rosie grinned, watching the girl play her part so well. Madam Rosie waited for him to leave, then called to Yu Ren Jin.

'Crazy digging man paying ten pounds for you,' she cackled, 'I think he not back for long time. You can work, but no speak. No need tell you speak English.'

'He was funny,' said Yu Ren Jin, laughing with Rosie. 'Poor man will work hard. If get ten pounds or not, I work anyway. I stay quiet and mysterious with white men.'

Seamus left, packed his tent and immediately sold his claim to the next newcomer he saw. Packing his belongings, he strode up the river bank and into the bush beyond. Ron saw him leave but was too late to stop him.

'Oh mate, you've got it bad,' he said, 'Molly's gonna miss you too.'

Three months later a thin, bearded Irish man stumbled out of the bush and into the main diggings. He made his way to Ron's claim and collapsed.

'Good God man,' said Ron, looking at the exhausted wraith and offering him water, 'Where've you been?'

‘Up river,’ said Seamus, pulling out a tin and unscrewing the lid. ‘Think I’ve got enough now.’

Ron looked inside and saw it half filled with alluvial gold flecks and a couple of small nobbies.

‘Aye, reckon you have Irish,’ said Ron, ‘Shall I take it to the assayer and get your money? You’ve not been on a legal claim for a while. Don’t want to lose it to the government now. First let’s get you looked after.’

Seamus could only nod in response, and complied as Ron lifted him to his feet and took him straight to Molly.

‘Can you see to him while I go to the assay office?’

‘Surely. He looks terrible,’ said Molly, brushing the hair from his eyes. ‘What have you been up to my lad?’

Molly busied herself getting ale, soup and a chunk of bread which Seamus wolfed down. She washed his hands, shaved the straggling grey-flecked beard away, and conjured a clean shirt from somewhere. Seamus accepted all the attentions without a word, then looked to the tent flap, watching for Ron’s return.

‘He’ll not be long Seamus,’ said Molly, ‘Rest awhile and I’ll call you when he’s back.’

Seamus closed his eyes and quickly fell asleep. Meanwhile Lucky Ron exchanged the gold, and dropped into Madam Rosie’s on the way back. He’d discovered there was an arrangement after Seamus left so quickly. He also knew that the girl had been in high demand by the other miners.

‘Irish is back Madam Rosie,’ said Ron, putting his head into the laundry tent, ‘Best get your girl to tidy up. He’ll be here within half an hour.’

‘He got the money?’ she called.

Ron resisted the urge to hit a woman and responded through gritted teeth, ‘Yes, though it near killed him.’

‘Good. She’ll be ready,’ said the Madam, ‘I’ll go, he’s paid for some time together.’

Ron glowered at her and returned to Molly’s tent. She hushed him as he came in, nodding to where Seamus was sleeping.

‘Did he get enough money?’ she asked, ‘And will you tell him what that girl’s really like?’

‘He’s cleared ten pounds from that tin, and no, I won’t tell him,’ said Ron, ‘I reckon it’d kill him. He’s got to find out himself, when he’s stronger.’

Seamus stirred and opened his eyes, smiling as he saw Ron.

‘Did I do alright?’ he asked, ‘Is there enough?’

‘Ten pounds and a few pence. You did it,’ said Ron, ‘I wish you’d change your mind though. You could start a business with ten pounds.’

Seamus shook his head, slowly stood and put his hand out. Ron reluctantly handed over the two five pound notes and coins, then folded his arms and lowered his head as Seamus passed. His feet took him straight to the laundry. Gone was the smiling, happy man that had first met her. Madam Rosie wasn’t in their shop, so he walked straight to the back.

Yu Ren Jin was seated where he had first seen her, hands in her lap, eyes downcast. Seamus walked over, took her hand and sat down. She glanced at his changed appearance and turned a gasp of surprise into a small cough. She put both hands out flat, and he placed the ten pounds in them. Yu Ren Jin gave a small bow and put the money into her pocket, then put her

hands into his. Seamus was in heaven. He'd worked so hard to be worthy of his angel, and he'd succeeded, though it cost him almost all he had.

'My love, I'll come back tomorrow and we can have more time together,' he said, stroking the back of her hands with his thumbs. 'I've just returned and must rest. See you in the morning my love.'

She inclined her head and looked into his eyes, even giving his hands a small squeeze when she smiled her farewell. Seamus dropped to his knees and kissed both hands, then walked calmly out of the tent, a small smile on his tired face.

Yu Ren Jin wasted no time. She had a bag packed and ready, and no sooner had Seamus left through the front of the tent, she went out the back and ran to a cart bound for Melbourne. She'd bartered passage from a regular client who was now looking forward to her company for the next three days. By the time Seamus had reached Ron's tent, and Madam Rosie had returned to the laundry, Yu Ren Jin was already leaving the goldfields.

The day began bright and clear as Seamus rose from a corner of Ron's tent. They'd had a few drams the night before, and his wasn't as clear as he wished.

I'll give it to midday and clean myself up before I see her.

He washed in the stream, purchased a couple of pies for himself and Ron, and walked to Ron's claim.

'Thanks Lucky, for letting me stay with you,' said Seamus handing over the rabbit pie, 'I'll get myself sorted out today after I've seen Yu Ren Jin.'

Ron nodded and put the pie to one side for later on.

‘Just make sure you’re ready for whatever comes,’ said Ron, ‘I’m just saying that you’ve only really known this girl for about four days. Don’t rush things.’

‘I know, I’ve had lots of thinking time in the past three months,’ said Seamus, his familiar smile returning ‘I won’t rush. Well, I’ll try not to.’

Seamus made his way to the laundry where Madam Rosie stood, hands on hips.

‘You gave her the money?’

‘Yes, ten pounds as agreed.’

‘Well she’s gone. I came back yesterday and no Yu Ren Jin,’ shouted the angry woman,

‘We’re making good money, lots of customers, and now she’s gone. With your money too.’

Seamus dropped onto a stack of linen, ‘Gone? How? When?’

‘She left after you came, took the money and gone to Sydney or Melbourne,’ she spat,

‘That’s where the good money is for concubines. Hah! Lived up to the name I gave her. Yu Ren Jin. Means Fool’s Gold. And you and me are fools.’

Madam Rosie cackled as she watched Seamus’ face change from a shocked white to angry red. He spun around and ran from the tent leaving a trail of linen in the mud behind. He ran until out of earshot of the main diggings then let loose with a primordial scream from the bottom of his well-worn boots.

Lucky Ron stood at the bar in Molly’s nursing a drink and worrying about Seamus. He’d been back to the laundry and discovered the girl had fled with Seamus’ hard earned cash.

Why didn't he warn Seamus about the girl's real job? Where was Seamus now? He hoped he hadn't done anything stupid. Molly stood in the corner watching Ron as she dried tankards.

A flick of the tent flap and Seamus walked in. Molly's other patrons went silent at the sight of this fool.

'Right, closing time. You'll seen what you came here to see. Go home to your wives, girlfriends or both,' she called, then more quietly, 'Not you Ron, and Seamus sit a while.'

Her customers chuckled and accepted the early closing for once. Calling their goodnights as they left. Ron and Seamus remained at the bar where Molly poured three double drams of whisky.

'I think we all need this,' she said downing hers in one.

Seamus drank his and put his hand on the bar, towards Molly. 'What would I do without you Molly girl?'

'You eejit, you've already done it,' she said calmly, putting her hand on his. 'You get it into your head that a prostitute is your best choice of wife. I've been here the whole time Irish. You only had to ask.'

Ron finished his drink and beamed at them both.

'Finally!'

Seamus looked up and saw the real gold on these diggings standing before him.

