

Camp Description

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Wednesday, 31 October 2007

A DESCRIPTION IN 1869 OF THE LAWERENCE CHINESE CAMP

AMONG THE CELESTIALS

Three years have now elapsed since the Chinese first obtained a footing in Otago. The reception they meet with was not by any means an enthusiastic one. Indeed, the policy of admitting them into the place at all was doubted by some, and boldly reprehended by others. On the goldfields, the proposal was met by a perfect storm of indignation. The Chinese were denounced as a dissolute race, a pack of rogues and vagabonds, who followed no lawful employment, but simply dogged the footprints of the European miner to jump his claim and plunder his tail race. To these professional attainments was added a host of minor virtues, such as pilfering hen-roosts, appropriating a neighbor's cat, or impounding his poodle for gastronomic purposes. By throwing dust in the eyes of others, their enemies succeeded in concealing the beam in their own eyes, and in proportion, as Chinese depravity was made to lick the dust, European virtue rose phoenix - like upon the ashes. Every man who had not been distinguished for a strict observance of amenities of civilized life lifted up the voice of virtuous indignation, and thanked the fates that they were not as other men are, more especially Chinamen. Amid the din of this self-satisfying clamor, the original object of the contest was lost sight of, and when "John" - as he is famously dubbed - did make his appearance, he was received with nothing more hostile than a cold shoulder. As if to defy the threatened danger at his first essay, he walked right into Tuapeke, the very heart of the disaffected country, and having secured the aid of a friendly native, he was soon ensconced amongst the industrial pursuits of the province. Since then periodical accessions have been made to either number, and Chinamen are now to be found in almost every part of the province. Tuapeke has still retained a prestige, and down to the present time it is the only place in Otago that can boast of a Chinese camp - one of those national outposts around which they rally to commemorate the usages of their fatherland, free from the restraints imposed by the prejudices of the alien.

In outward appearance, the Camp represents nothing that would be called imposing. Its architectural dignity is supported by the sheets of galvanized iron and hitches of weatherboarding, and its brand is essentially that of a digging township in the early stage of existence.

The buildings are wedged a trifle too closely together to suit modern ideas of good ventilation and sanitary improvement. Still the want of such scientific aids to domestic comfort is not unprecedented in the history of goldfields settlement, consequently their absence in their case does not strike the mind as being unusual. A closer inspection, however, brings out the foreign element in its broadest aspect. The hieroglyphical tracings on the signboards, resembling bars in the music set upon the edge, perplex the eye. The outlandish gibberish, sounding like a cross between the tonic sol-fa system and the first efforts of a child to articulate its mother tongue, is equally embarrassing to the ear. Then there are the hook-nosed shoes, the nankeen breeches, and the broad-rimmed hat, by which the claims of class distinction are adjusted among our Mongolian friends, all contributing towards a scene sufficiently novel to make even an "Old Identity" feel as if he were a stranger in the land of his adoption. The habitations are devoted to a variety of pursuits more or less intimately associated with the social and domestic instincts of a race whose services are dedicated. They include one or two general stores, with stocks as large and as well sorted as any European supervision. The hermetically sealed jars and glassware are perhaps, a trifle more numerous than we are accustomed to, still the difference in other respects is scarcely perceptible. They are distinguished by the same rank luxuriance of commercial enterprise. Chests of tea are piled up against trusses of sugar, bags of flour and other bread stuffs are propped by long handled shovels, picks, and sluice forks, built one above the other on every available corner of the floor, while the ceiling is literally draped with fitches of bacon, nests of American buckets, water tight boots, oils skins, &c. The principal days for transacting business are Saturdays and Sundays. On one or other of these days John makes a point of coming into the camp, partly for the purpose of laying in a stock of provisions for the ensuing week, and partly to learn what is going on around him. In these excursions he is usually accompanied by his mates, and on their first arrival, the store is the first place they resort to. Before concluding a purchase, the article in demand undergoes strict examination, and any dispute that may arise among themselves respecting either the quality is left to the final decision of the cook of the party for the time being. This functionary holds office for a week at a time, each member assuming it in his turn. The dignity of the office is further enhanced by certain discretionary powers vested in him respecting the articles to be got for the ensuing week, so that the position becomes one of the considerable influence. The opinion of John defrauds the Customs revenue by living exclusively upon rice and provincial fed pork, is a fallacy. His notions of good cheer are quite as orthodox as those of the European brotherhood, and despite all that has been said to the contrary, his tastes are no less fastidious. The relative merits of a pig and a poodle are equally well defined by him, and the load of provisions which constitutes his week's supply proves that his digestive organs are none of the weakest. This part of his mission concludes with the storekeeper's "shout", which consists of a cup of hot liquid drawn from a tin vessel kept simmering over a kerosene flame on the counter. It is dignified by the name of tea, and although relished by Chinamen, it leaves but a very poor impression upon the palate of an Englishman. John is now at leisure to follow the bent of his own inclination, and as the gambling houses are close at hand, the chances are two to one that he wends his way thither. They are but dingy looking establishments, still they appear to have

immense attraction for Chinamen. Their proceedings are conducted without the slightest attempt at disguise, a fact which is rather singular considering that the law of New Zealand has defined gambling to be a quasi-criminal offence. The play is carried on in an apartment communicated with by the front door. It is boxed in at the upper end by a wooden partition with a narrow passage running down the centre. With the exception of two plain deal benches erected at right angles to each other, these apartments are wholly destitute of furniture or fittings. Behind the benches sufficient space is left to allow the "banker" to occupy an elevated position, so as to command a full view of what is going on before him. The company is grouped together in front, those engaged in the venture occupying the foremost place. The stakes are tabled on characters representing figures, and metal tokens are used instead of dice. On being emptied out of the box, a handful are abstracted from the heap at random, and according as the remainder count an odd or even number, the stakes are lost or won. Should the losing stakes not be sufficient to cover the winnings, the banker has to make up the deficiency; and, in the event of an over plus, he pockets the balance. The play is generally limited to half a crown a throw; but the performance is gone about so smartly that even a heavy purse stands a fair show of getting cleaned out without loss of time. It is while so engaged that all the fire and energy of "John's" nature is brought out. In other pursuits, he is one of those steady, plodding creatures, the even tenor of whose way is all but impossible to disturb. Here he is to be found wrought up to an intense pitch of excitement. If winning, he gets well-nigh frantic with delight, and if losing he follows his bad luck with a dogged determination which almost seems to set at defiance the decrees of fate. Considering the uproar and confusion that prevail during the heat of the play, it is a remarkable fact, that open rupture seldom or never takes place. The portion of the building boxed in behind the partition consists of a number of ante-rooms, set apart for smoking opium. The largest is not more capacious than an ordinary-sized packing case. They are neither lighted nor ventilated, and as each of them is supposed to accommodate six smokers, their noisome condition may be easily imagined. The floor is elevated a few inches above the ground. The opium board with the small lamp attached is placed in the centre, around which the occupants squat down in tailor-like fashion and blow away the noxious vapor. By degrees it takes effect upon them, and they drop back into a wooden board, blocked out in the centre for the express purpose of securing their bodies into a reclining posture. Having overcome the first effects of the vapor, they get up and stagger away, thus well refreshed as the denizen of the cap-room after enjoying his "forty winks" under the table. The ostensible object of these dens is to provide relaxation to those engaged in the play, and although anyone is admitted on payment of 6d, the habitué of the gaming table is the most frequent occupant. He resorts to them much on the same principle that a patron of the turf adjourns to a refreshment booth, and a friendly pipe with one has just as much significance as a friendly nip with the other. They are not infrequently resorted to by the disappointed gambler to solace himself for his bad luck. The savage earnestness, with which a company of these unfortunate speculators inhale the poisonous vapor, is something painful to witness. They puff away in sullen silence, until the fetid atmosphere around them becomes dead weight, under which they drop back into a state of semi-unconsciousness. Opium smoking is undoubtedly the besetting sin of the nation; the counter part of those dissipated habits imported from certain other countries, although a pernicious practice, it can scarcely be deemed a public scandal. It debases the individual, but it does not outrage public decency by exhibitions of pothouse pugilism and street brawling, therefore it becomes us not to be too severe in the strictness we put upon it. Among the other curiosities of the camp, the eating houses are, perhaps most inviting. The one side of the room is occupied by the cook, and the other by the customers, and while the one is engaged wrapping up savoury messes into dough balls and pie-crusts, the other is busy dispatching them in meals that cost 1s, and upwards. The native artisans are few in number, still there are one or two rather ingenious tradesmen among them. There is a working jeweler, a carpenter, a baker, and hairdresser, all apparently doing a pretty fair stroke of business. One building devoted to benevolent purposes is used as a refuge for new comers in destitute circumstances. Here lodgings and rations are provided, until such time as the inmate gets the work, when he is expected to

refund the cost. In only one instance is there a resistant female, a good stout south of Ireland wench, who is reported to have espoused one of these sons of Shem some years ago, while residing in Victoria. To all appearance she has completely conquered her national prejudices, and appears to enjoy life just as heartily under Chinese dispensation, as she could reasonably be expected to do under any other. Both over her own particular "John" and his brethren she appears to exercise considerable influence.

Although his leanings to the camp are pretty fully developed, John is otherwise perfectly cosmopolitan in his habits. The European tradesman is largely patronized by him, and one of the most powerful agencies that have operated towards the removal of the prejudice entertained against him, is the extent to which he has become the ready money customer. One of the most respectable firms in Tuapeka is known to have admitted that the takings from Chinamen alone on a Saturday night averaged L30.

So as far as persevering industry is concerned, the Mongolian is far ahead of his European neighbor. He lacks the enterprise, however, by which the other is characterized. He follows up an old accent closely, but he is no where at finding out a new lead. He re-works tailings, or scrapes out the refuse of an abandoned mine, and makes a good thing of it; but it is very rarely indeed that he can be induced to venture upon untried ground. His principle appears to be that certain prospect of small wages is better than the uncertain prospect of a large find. Even on these terms he is a valuable accession to the country. He has utilized the refuse of European mining, alike to the advantage of the place and his own personal benefit.

With regard to the impeachments made against his moral character, we are only stating what is now generally admitted, when we say that they are proved to have been unfounded. Police reports and criminal statistics are alike corroborative of this fact. He gambles and smokes opium, it is true, still these practices tend; and although not prepared to hold up John as a pattern to society, experience has shown that he does not rank among the worst class of its members.