

## The Briefcase

Spring in the Changjiang [Yangtze] River Valley with its soft breezes, fresh, crisp air and warm sunshine was beautiful. The wheat fields looked like a vast sea and scattered villages like floating ships. On the banks of the network of rivers, willow trees were beginning to put out tender shoots and the asparagus was already tinged green. The tranquil waters had survived the grey winter and were now dyed a verdant green, mirroring the mountains and trees. What a picturesque scene! At high noon, the still fish could be seen at the bottom of the rivers, like submarines at the ready. As the different forms of life were awakening from their winter's hibernation, with every second, spring was quickening!

A river skirted Huang Village and meandered towards the west. Half a kilometre away from the village, there was a little stone bridge spanning the river, linking the road from north to south. Under it, two dozen people, bent double, were carefully searching for something in the water. Though moving slowly, they stirred up endless murky ripples, spoiling the calm surface.

Passers-by were astonished, for the water was still chilly. Even buffalos were shy of it at this time of the year. What were the people doing in the cold water, their sleeves and trouser-legs rolled up? Curious people could not help asking.

No one replied, not even if a person shouted himself hoarse. That was mysterious. Huang Shunquan, an honest peasant, looked up in surprise at the inquirer as if he were an idiot. What a question! Not a single person in the water even hinted what he was looking for.

Of course, Huang was no fool. He had been in this world over forty years. Life was merely work and food, simple and monotonous. Yet it was too complicated to be put into words. After all, there was nothing more difficult than finding work and food in this world. He had never thought about it. Survival was a human instinct. However, he found his basic needs often endangered. He had to toil, to struggle for them. Because of this, he hoped that people would help each other to make life a bit easier, instead of interfering with one another. At least, one should not stand in another's way. But even that was not easy. You wanted to avoid trouble, but there were bullies who would force their way into your life, grabbing your food, taking away your money, making you sweat blood on an empty stomach. To make both ends meet, you had to do something else besides farming. But what? Robbery? Theft? But people like Huang would never dream of doing that. So there were only two alternatives: begging, which was realistic, or finding some money by chance, which was most unlikely. The latter

was really stupid. Could it rain grain? Those who put their trust in windfalls were always disappointed. No man could live on illusions.

Yet they would never be rooted out of people's minds completely. On the contrary, their dreams kept appearing. And it was a rumour which had caught the imagination of Huang and the others, causing them to go to all this trouble.

The previous winter, in 1937, when the Japanese had invaded China and the Kuomintang had retreated, Chen Longsheng, the former head of the county police, had rounded up some people and set up an armed force. He had declared himself the commander and behaved like a tyrant. Instead of fighting the invaders, he and his men were raiding the local peasants, who were defending their villages against the Japanese. In one such battle, which took place to the west of Huang Village, Chen was badly defeated. It was on this small stone bridge that a peasant wielding a broadsword had caught up with Chen and struck at him. Chen warded off the blow with his briefcase in which were three hundred silver dollars. It fell into the river, while the man barely escaped. The news spread like wildfire throughout the village. Who had witnessed it? No one. Who was the first to tell the news. Nobody knew. What did the briefcase look like? No one had seen it. Who had counted the money? Nobody had a clue. But everybody said it was true. Huang, hearing of it, believed it, or rather hoped it was true. That was more exciting than disbelieving it. He learned that people had been sent on boats to drag the river but had failed. Then the story was denied, which convinced Huang all the more it was true. Like other honest peasants, who had been cheated too many times before, he had his own way of judging things. He had learned to be cunning after many bitter experiences. He was sceptical about anything he heard, but if someone tried to disprove it, he was more inclined to believe it, thinking the man had an ulterior motive and was deliberately trying to fool others. Huang was certain that he would never be taken in again. And he did not want to tell anyone what he was thinking. He hoped that the others would remain duped. Wasn't it more practical to worship three hundred silver dollars rather than clay idols? Imagine! What luck! A picul of grain cost seven dollars, so forty-three piculs could be bought with the three hundred dollars. Huang could never hope to amass such a fortune in his lifetime, no matter how hard he worked. How could he let a chance like this go by? Now that everybody thought it was all nonsense, he guessed no one would go and look for the money. So in time, he would lay his hands on the briefcase. Of course, it wasn't easy. He doubted his luck. Perhaps he would never find it, but he would not complain. He would tell his children or grand-children to retrieve it. This was the sort of thing that happened in legends. The treasure was there. Lucky people would find it. In Huang's mind, good fortune was the result of the good deeds of your ancestors or, as he put it, your roots. These determined the harvest, a person's life, the children's filial piety and even your security when going out. . . . They controlled everything. If the roots were not good enough, even if you had a bumper harvest, you might fall ill. Huang was not sure if he would find the briefcase, for he had no idea if his roots were good or not. He was not ambitious. He simply took what opportunities life offered. But he resolved to do good deeds all his life, so as to bring luck to his descendants.

China was like a fairyland. Sheer imagination could work wonders! This illusion of Huang made him a noble man.

That was why no one bothered to answer inquisitive passers-by. A person might discover what they were about, but he should never ask questions.

They had not organized themselves to search for the briefcase. Though their aim was the same, none of them had mentioned it so far.

After breakfast that day, Huang had begun making ropes. Some of his neighbours had been preparing spades or chatting leisurely, others were still holding their breakfast bowls. They seemed to have nothing urgent to do. Suddenly Rongfu, who lived to the east of the village, hurried over the stone bridge and into the street. He trotted through the threshing ground and passed the others without saying anything. He looked tense and upset. He entered his house and, in no time, came out with a basket slung across his shoulder. He headed back the way he had come. People were puzzled and then spotted a few children groping about for something under the bridge. Rongfu went there and, without any hesitation, stepped into the water. At first, the onlookers were astonished, but very soon they realized what was going on. So they all started! One smacked his lips, while another inquired aloud, "What are they doing?" "I'll go and have a look," someone answered to justify his going there. Immediately people scattered. They went home, collected what they thought were the most suitable tools and then went to the stone bridge.

Huang had never expected that it would happen so quickly. No one had said a word, yet now they were all vying with each other to start. He felt his hopes were shattered. Nobody in the village had been taken in. Like him, they all believed there was a briefcase there and wanted to retrieve it. Who could blame them? They were as poor as Huang and their experiences were the same. Farming alone could not bring them adequate food and clothes. What else could they do? But here was a chance. One of them might hit the jackpot. How could they easily give up such a dream? And like Huang, everyone was cross that all the others had the same idea. It was foolish, Huang realized pretty soon. Well, he had no choice but to wade into the water and try his luck.

Carrying his basket, he joined them. The water was freezing cold. A man without much outdoor exercise would have winced and stepped back as soon as his foot touched water. But Huang did not give it a second thought. He was used to it. Or perhaps the gods intended him to undertake an important mission and had toughened him up since childhood. After all, what peasant was afraid of chill, spring water? Look at the people in the river! They were really men. It was like an army, each soldier in his place, ready for battle but without any commander. Everybody had his own idea where the briefcase was located, on either side of the bridge. Some thought that since there were three hundred silver dollars in it, it must be heavy and, most likely, buried in the mud, so they used bamboo poles to poke the river bed. Others went a bit further down the river thinking it must have been carried there by the current. Huang believed in fate. According to him, life and death, fortune and misfortune all depended on fate. There was no need to try to be clever. So he bent his back and searched the places which the others ignored. Huang was a very practical man. He knew there was not much chance, so as soon as he stepped into the water, he threw into his basket whatever he could find, clams, snails, and so on. At least he would get a little money selling them the following morning. Time was precious, and soon his basket was half full. Pleased, he decided to carry on, hoping that the others would get disappointed and give up. A patient man, he would go on looking a little longer. There was little hope that day, he thought. He came here solely to ease his mind. He had wanted to see the others disappointed. That was why he had joined them. He did not want to find it that day, so he did not want the others to find it either. If anyone should come across it, his fond dream would be shattered. If he should find it, then the others' hopes would be dashed. Any-

way, it was embarrassing if anyone retrieved the briefcase publicly. It could easily cause trouble. If the gods were merciful, they would send people home empty-handed.

While fumbling in the water, Huang meditated and, at the same time, kept an eye on the others. Suddenly his fingers touched a stone and he tried to find some snails on it. But the stone was rather big and flat. Still, it would make a good step for his doorway. He groped about its side in the mud, trying to find out its thickness. All of a sudden, he withdrew his hands as if they had been bitten by something and staggered back, making a big splash. Heads turned. Everybody asked, looking in his direction, "What's the matter?"

When he had calmed down a little, he tried to dismiss it, saying, "Oh, nothing. A Chinese herring. It stung me when I tried to catch it."

Curiosity appeased, no one paid any more attention to him. But Huang's heart was fluttering. He had found it! Yes. It lay close against the stone, slippery and soft to the touch.

When he was himself again, he began to doubt it. He could have been wrong in such haste. Stooping again, he meticulously felt the briefcase all over several times. No mistake! This was it! The things inside felt hard to his touch and moved when squeezed.

Huang was extremely tense. What should he do? He could not pull it out in front of so many people, nor did he dare to leave. Wading round the stone, he racked his brains, wondering what action to take. His mind worked feverishly for some time, but to no avail. The sun was low, and it was time to prepare supper. He decided to take it out and hide it somewhere when the others left for home. But on second thoughts, he changed his mind. There was no set time for meals, and probably no one wanted to leave empty-handed. People did not have to eat together like in the army. Each household had its own stove, and anyone who was hungry could go and eat and come back again. Some people would remain in the river. So how could he make things happen as he wished?

As he was weighing the pros and cons, there was a commotion. Down river, the water was being noisily churned up. People began to wade in the direction of the clamour. A man had disturbed some fish under a pile of stones, and they had swished off in all directions, some even leaping out of the water. A bright idea suddenly occurred to Huang's slow mind. With the attention of the others distracted, he quickly yanked the briefcase out of the water, ran up the bank and dashed into a wheat field. Having hidden it in haste, he returned nimbly to the water. Bending low, he fumbled about again as if nothing had happened.

The fish disappeared in the deep water, and people began to quieten down, scattering again to carry on with their search.

But Huang's mind was in a whirl. Though still in the water, his heart was in the wheat field, fretting that the briefcase might not be hidden properly and so easily discovered by someone else. From time to time, he climbed up the bank and squatted smoking, his eyes in that direction. He even went to see if it was still there. He could have put it into his basket without the others knowing, but he felt guilty. They might suspect him if he should be the first to leave, for why should he go home so eagerly? He had to pretend to be searching. He was faking and this gave him an unprecedented sense of guilt. Not being a ruthless fellow, Huang did not want to let his neighbours down. Too innocent, he could not bear the mental suffering of being a hypocrite. He hoped his embarrassment would soon come to an end. Why should he suffer? All he wanted was to get some money without hurting anyone. He did not mean harm. If he did not keep it a secret, it would bring him unimaginable trouble. In chaotic times like these, no one wanted to show off his wealth. Huang had not expected to find the

briefcase then and there. But unfortunately he had stumbled upon it. Was it luck or misfortune? Should he smile or weep?

Huang was in a dilemma. Confused, he went to check if the briefcase was still there, without realizing that his queer behaviour had already attracted the others' attention.

After a short while, he again went to the bank pretending to smoke. He walked slowly towards the briefcase, squatting to examine it. When he stood up, he found himself surrounded by dozens of people. Riveted on him were all kinds of eyes, expressing their dissatisfaction, disgust, astonishment or admiration. His spiritual wall of self-defence collapsed at once. He felt guilty and wanted to say something to make up for his wrongdoing.

But it was too late. None of them paid any more attention to the briefcase, though they knew there were three hundred silver dollars in it.

"Why pretend?" they grumbled. "You found it. OK, it's yours! Just tell us, instead of letting us waste time here with empty stomachs."

Greatly upset, Huang opened the briefcase and turned it upsidedown. All the silver coins clinked on the ground. Pointing to the pile of glittering silver, he said in a hoarse voice, "Help yourselves!"

Only then did the people realize that no one in Huang Village was greedy. They seemed indifferent. No one touched a coin.

For a moment, self-respect seemed to be the only thing that mattered in the world.

Money became synonymous with dirt.

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The people from Huang Village had made themselves moral giants before a pile of silver coins. But soon they realized that they had made a great mistake. Everybody was nervous sensing that something terrible might happen to the village and Huang Shunquan.

They regretted blaming him, because no finder would be safe unless he kept it a secret. That was the only way to steer clear of danger. So what Huang had done was right. But they had foolishly criticized him, thinking him selfish. Their attitude had seemed very noble and their performance at the roadside had been impressive to passers-by. But by doing this, they had revealed the secret that could land Huang in a terrible fix.

With the government gone, warlords had sprung up everywhere. There were a dozen of them within this area of half a dozen square kilometres, each controlling a tiny district. They were gangs of marauders, bandits, armed landlords, religious sects and armed peasant forces which had been led astray. Under the pretext of fighting the Japanese, they had expanded their forces, extracted every cent and taken away whatever weapons they could get from the people. All well-off families were harassed, even ruined. Those who did not have ready cash were taken as hostages. However, Huang Village was an exception because it was too poor. Since there was nothing valuable in it, no one bothered to disturb its peace. Now there were three hundred dollars in Huang's hands. When news of this got around, there was no escaping trouble.

Only last winter, three months before to be exact, a man had dug out a golden statue on the Junhe River worksite. Word of this travelled very fast. Within half a day, eleven bands of fully-armed men arrived. They surrounded the man as if going to tear him apart. They stared at one another, ready to fight, regardless of what pacts had previously allied them. Fortunately a few gold-

smiths arrived and decided that it was not gold but bronze. They built a furnace and melted it to prove the point. A fight was thus avoided, in which many people could have been killed.

Huang understood very clearly that the briefcase in his hand was like a time-bomb, and that he himself was in constant danger. There was no escaping now.

Without counting it thoroughly, Huang took the money home. The short way from the river to his house was desolate. Even the wheat shoots and the asparagus sprouts seemed to have shrunk. It was hard to find a place to hide a person. The few trees scattered at the village entrance were still bare, while the dilapidated houses stood out conspicuously on the plain like magnificent buildings and pavilions. Sheep were bleating and dogs barking as if announcing the news to all evil men. Huang's heart trembled. What a world! One would starve to death without money. But when one had it, it brought trouble. How could one live? Though Huang might not have good roots, he had never done anyone any harm. Why did he deserve such misery?

He took the briefcase home and threw it on the rickety table in the centre room. Having plumped down on a small stool at the door, he sat brooding for a long time. Villagers came to glance at him and left quietly. Even the children became wary. The air was oppressive. Everybody seemed to be wondering what to do.

Huang was at his wits' end. The chaotic times had laid everything bare. Even a foolish man became cynical. Grief and disillusionment made people want to commit suicide. Poverty pressed people to revolt.

Huang's wife wanted to hide the briefcase, but Huang told her with a wave of his hand not to bother.

He seemed to be waiting for someone to collect it.

The news about the briefcase travelled so fast that all afternoon people kept coming from villages round to the stone bridge. The wheat plot where Huang had hidden the briefcase was virtually trodden flat. A man found a silver coin! The visitors talked animatedly. Some said that only that morning the wheat plot had been piled with silver coins, and the peasants of Huang Village had carried them home load after load. Everyone was rich. Some waded into the river to try their luck, complaining that the Huang villagers were a stingy lot, not letting others have a share. Still, they believed that there must be some left over. The people of Huang Village became flustered. To clear themselves, some whispered the truth.

"Don't count your chickens now!" the more sophisticated men warned. "Huang will risk his neck if he tries to spend that money."

"Why?"

"The local leaders all support Mr Chen. This is Chen's domain. Will he forgive Huang if he learns the news? He'll send someone to fetch the money and if he doesn't get it, he'll have Huang's head instead!"

Sinister characters lurked around the village at dusk, but left later. Old Rongfu and some other good neighbours hurried to talk to Huang and urged him to flee.

The villagers had supper and turned in early, though they lay fully clothed with their eyes open. Not a light flickered.

There were noises of footsteps, and dogs kept barking all night long.

Huang and his family went into hiding. No one knew where they were.

As Rongfu passed Huang's house early next morning, he noticed that the door was wide open. Two men with pistols at their belts were sitting inside. At a lonely spot outside the village, he ran into Huang, who had just emerged from a reedy pond near the river, the briefcase in his hand.

"Don't go back! Go and hide!" Rongfu urged.

But Huang was indifferent. He came closer, seemingly relaxed, and said with a smile, "I'll take it back."

"Back to whom?"

"Chen Longsheng." Huang was expressionless. "Then we'll all have some peace."

"Bah!" Rongfu heaved a long sigh and left in a huff. He was cross and tense, just as he had been the previous day on his way to search for the briefcase. He blamed himself for causing all this trouble because it was he who had encouraged the others to look for it. He had not only brought trouble to Huang, but also shattered all the villagers' hopes.

Having walked more than ten kilometres to see Chen, Huang was very hungry, for he had not had a thing to eat that morning. He had thought that Chen would certainly give him a meal, but to his surprise, Chen, after counting the coins, said that fifty-one dollars were missing and asked Huang to pay for the loss. The poor man could neither argue back nor produce a single coin. Before letting him go, Chen had him whipped fifty-one times, saying each lash stood for a missing dollar.

When he returned home, Huang fell seriously ill. His mind was unhinged. He was often seen wandering in the village or standing at others' doors. When given food, he ate; when given money, he put it into his pocket. In the evening, he went to the stone bridge and threw all the money he had collected into the river. Sometimes children went into the water to retrieve it, but he would try to catch them and spank their bottoms.

Three years later, he died.