

The Refugees

They walked through the new capital, alone and from a far country, yes, although their own lands were only a few hundred miles perhaps from this very street upon which they now walked. But to them it was very far. Their eyes were the eyes of those who have been taken suddenly and by some unaccountable force from the world they have always known and always thought safe until this time. They, who had been accustomed only to country roads and fields, walked now along the proud street of the new capital, their feet treading upon the new concrete side-walk, and although the street was full of things they had never seen before, so that there were even automobiles and such things of which they had never even heard, still they looked at nothing, but passed as in a dream, seeing nothing.

There were several hundreds of them passing at this moment. If they did not look at anything nor at anyone, neither did any look at them. The city was full of refugees, many thousands of them, fed after a fashion, clothed somehow, sheltered in mats in great camps outside the city wall. At any hour of the day lines of ragged men and women and a few children could be seen making their way towards the camp, and if any city-dweller noticed them it was to think with increased bitterness:

‘More refugees-- will there never be an end to them? We will all starve trying to feed them even a little.’

This bitterness, which is the bitterness of fear, made small shopkeepers bawl out rudely to the many beggars who came hourly to beg at the doors, and it made men ruthless in paying small fares to the rickshaw pullers, of which there were ten times as many as could be used, because the refugees were trying to earn something thus. Even the usual pullers of rickshaws, who followed this as their profession, cursed the refugees because, being starving they would pull for anything given them, and so fares were low for all, and all suffered. With the city full of refugees, then, begging at every door, swarming into every unskilled trade and service, lying dead on the streets at every frozen dawn, why should one look at this fresh horde coming in now at twilight of winter's day?

But these were no common men and women, no riff-raff from some community, always poor and easily starving in a flood time. No, these were men and women of which any nation might have been proud. It could be seen they were all from one region, for they wore garments woven out of the same dark blue cotton stuff, plain and cut in an old-fashioned way, the sleeves long and the coats long and full. The men wore smocked aprons, the smocking done in curious, intricate, beautiful designs. The women had bands of the same plain blue stuff wrapped like kerchiefs about their heads. But men and women were tall and strong in frame, although the women's feet were bound. There were a few lads in the throng, a few children sitting in baskets slung upon a pole across the shoulders of their fathers, but there were no young girls, no young infants. Every man and every lad bore a burden on his shoulder. This burden was always

bedding, quilts made of the blue cotton stuff and padded. Clothing and bedding were clean and strongly made. On top of every folded quilt, with a bit of mate between, was an iron cauldron. These cauldrons had doubtless been taken from the earthen ovens of the village when the people saw the time had come when they must move. But in no basket was there a vestige of food, nor was there a trace of food having been cooked in them recently.

This lack of food was confirmed when one looked closely into the faces of the people. In the first glance in the twilight they seemed well enough, but when one looked more closely, one saw they were the faces of people starving and moving now in despair to a last hope. They saw nothing of the strange sights of a new city because they were too near death to see anything. No new sight could move their curiosity. They were men and women who had stayed by their land until starvation drove them forth. Thus, they passed unseeing, silent, alien, as those who know themselves dying are alien, to the living.

The last one of this long procession of silent men and women was a little wizened old man. Even he carried a load of a folded quilt, a cauldron. But there was only one cauldron. In the other basket it seemed there was but a quilt, extremely ragged and patched, but clean still. Although the load was light it was too much for the old man. It was evident that in usual times he would be beyond the age of work, and was perhaps unaccustomed to such labour in recent years. His breath whistled as he staggered along, and he strained his eyes to watch those who were ahead of him lest he should be left behind, and his old wrinkled face was set in a sort of gasping agony.

Suddenly he could go no more. He set his burden with great gentleness, sank upon the ground, his head sunk between his knees, his eyes closed, panting desperately. Starved as he was, a little blood rose in dark patches on his cheeks. A ragged vendor selling hot noodles set his stand near, and shouted his trade cry, and the light from the stand fell on the old man's drooping figure. A man passing stopped and muttered, looking at him:

'I swear I can give no more this day if I am to feed my own even nothing but noodles but here is this old man. Well, I will give him the bit of silver I earned today against tomorrow and trust to tomorrow again. If my own old father had been alive, I would have given it to him.'

He fumbled and brought out of his ragged girdle a bit of a silver coin, and after a moment's hesitation and muttering, he added to it a copper penny.

'There, old father,' he said with a sort of bitter heartiness, 'let me see you eat noodles.'

The old man lifted his head slowly. When he saw the silver, he would not put out his hand. He said:

‘Sir, I did not beg of you. Sir, we have good land and we have never been starving like this before, having such good land. But this year the river rose and men starve even on good land, at such times; Sir, we have no seed left, even. We have eaten our seed. I told them, we cannot eat the seed. But they were young; and hungry and they ate it.

"Take it," said the man, and he dropped the money into the old man's smocked apron and went on his way, sighing.

The vendor prepared his bowl of noodles and called out:

‘How many will you eat, old man?’

Then was the old man stirred. He felt eagerly in his apron and when he saw the two coins there, the one copper and the other silver, he said:

‘One small bowl is enough.’

‘Can you eat only one small bowl, then?’ asked the vendor, astonished.

‘It is not for me,’ the old man answered.

The vendor started astonished, but being a simple man he said no more but prepared the bowl, and when it was finished, he called out. "Here it is." And he waited to see who would eat it.

Then the old man rose with a great effort and took the bowl between his shaking hands and he went to the other basket. There, while the vendor watched, the old man pulled aside the quilt until one could see the shrunken face of a small boy lying with his eyes fast closed. One would have said the child was dead except that when the old man lifted his head so his mouth could touch the edge of the little bowl he began to swallow feebly until the hot mixture was finished. The old man kept murmuring to him:

‘There, my heart - there, my child.’

‘Your grandson?’ said the vendor.

‘Yes, said the old man. ‘The son of my only son. Both my son and his wife were drowned as they worked on our land when the dikes broke.’

He covered the child tenderly and then, squatting on his haunches, he ran his tongue carefully around the little bowl and removed the last trace of food. Then, as though he had been fed, he handed the bowl, back to the vendor.

‘But you have the silver bit,’ cried the ragged vendor, yet more astonished when he saw the old man ordered no more.

The old man shook his head. 'That is for seed,' he replied. 'As soon as I saw it, I knew I would buy seed with it. They ate up all the seed and with what shall the land be sown again?'

'If I were not so poor myself, said the vendor, 'I might even have given you a bowl, but to give something to a man who has a bit of silver!' he shook his head puzzled.

'I do not ask you, brother,' said the old man. 'Well, I know you cannot understand. But if you had land you would know, it must be put to seed again or there will be starvation yet another year. The best I can do for this grandson of mine is to buy a little seed for the land. Yes, even though I die, and others must plant it, the land must be put to seed.'

He took up his load again, his old legs trembling, and straining his eyes down the long straight street, he staggered on.

- Pearl S. Buck

About the Story

Written by Pearl S Buck, 'The Refugees' brings out the tragedy of those hardworking poor people who are uprooted from their land as a result of natural calamities like floods. Even as they look for work, or a temporary support, they are generally treated as beggars in the alien land. The old man of this story is a symbol of men of strong character who can face such tragic phases in their lives to hail the dawn of prosperity once again. In the story, when a silver bit is thrown to the old man, he keeps it to purchase seeds so that he can go back to his native land and work for his grandson, the only survivor of this family.

Author of about seventy books, Pearl S Buck is the first American woman to win the Noble Prize for literature.

Glossary

riff-raff: the lowest of the low
smocked: decorated with small stitches
throng: a large crowd of people
cauldron: a large round metal pot
quilt: a thin cover put over the blanket
vestige: a small part
wizened: old

staggered: walked unsteadily
fumbled: tried and reached (for something)
girdle: a belt
haunches: lowers towards the ground

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative:

1. One of the baskets that the old refugee carries, contains _____
 - (a) seeds.
 - (b) fruits.
 - (c) vegetables.
 - (d) quilt.
2. The city dwellers notice refugees with _____
 - (a) bitterness.
 - (b) love.
 - (c) sympathy.
 - (d) empathy.
3. The old man gives the bowl of noodles to his _____
 - (a) son.
 - (b) daughter.
 - (c) wife.
 - (d) grandson.

(B) Answer to the following questions should not exceed 10-15 words each:

1. Why do the refugees in the story have to leave their land?
2. Name any two things in the new capital which the refugees have never seen before.
3. What load does the old man carry in the two baskets?
4. What shows that the refugees are all from our region?

(C) Answer to the following questions should not exceed 20-30 words each:

1. How do the refugees feel about the new place?
2. How do the local inhabitants feel about all the refugees in the city?
3. What finer human qualities are manifested in refugees' life of deprivation and suffering?
4. Why do the refugees look at nothing and pass as in a dream?
5. Why does the old man order only one small bowl of noodles?

(D) Answer to the following should not exceed 60-80 words each:

1. Describe the physical and mental condition of the refugees in the new capital.
2. What are the most important concerns of the old starved man and how does he show them in his behavior?

(E) Say whether the following are True or False. Write 'T' for True and 'F' for False in the bracket.

1. The city dwellers notice refugees with love. []
2. Rickshaw-pullers curse the refugees. []
3. The old man eats a bowl of noodles. []
4. The refugees are all from one region. []
5. There are only a few refugees in the city. []