

FINDERS KEEPERS.

Harry Chen looked like a middle-aged teacher. He always wore a tie and an old cotton jacket, even in the hot sun. His hair was going thin and he did not stand up straight. He was fifty years old and for the past twenty years had been a lecturer in archaeology at a university in Singapore.

He was also a thief.

His great love in life had always been archaeology. He loved to see things that had been hidden from human sight for hundreds, even thousands, of years. He loved the feeling of excitement he got when he held a piece of history in his hands. But his special love was pottery, the older the better.

Sometimes the university sent him to places where old pottery had been discovered. It was his job to sort out these things. The university would then put the things that were interesting in a museum where they could be shown to the public. But Harry Chen had his own private museum that nobody else knew about. He hated the idea of not keeping some of the old and, sometimes, beautiful things he found. And, if those beautiful things were only small things that nobody but he had seen, who would ever know if they were gone? So he kept them.

He had quite a collection of stolen things now, all carefully hidden in his home. They were mostly small, broken things that were not of much value. Even so, he did have some pots, rings and other favourite things that were extraordinary and lovely to see. He loved them so much he would sometimes, during the warm evenings, lay them all out on the floor to look at. He would examine each piece with love and care. Only he, he was sure, could understand their true value.

He lived alone in an old house which looked over the Singapore River. It was close to the antique shops which sold the old things he loved. He would often look in the shop windows at the beautiful things he could not afford to buy. Not on his salary. It made him angry to think that such things would end up in the home of some fat tourist who could not possibly see their true value as he could.

It wasn't fair.

Harry was looking forward to today. A very large old grave had been discovered while some forest land was being cleared. The university had been given the job of examining the grave and the things inside it. The grave was inside a big stone room which seemed to have been built for it.

'It's all a bit of a mystery so far, Harry,' said Professor Teo, Harry's head of department. 'The grave seems to be older than anything we'd expect to find on the island. It's definitely Chinese but I can't imagine whose grave it is.'

Harry was extremely interested. Perhaps there would be something for him to add to his collection.

'What would you like me to look at, Professor Teo?' asked Harry.

'Well, Harry,' answered the Professor, 'there's a few old bits - pots, vases and such like - which were found close to the body. They seem to be important but we aren't sure why yet. Perhaps you could see what you can find out.'

'No problem, Professor,' said Harry. 'I'll look into it.'

Soon the old pots were in Harry's room at the university and he was left alone to examine them. He loved this part of his work best of all.

He could see almost immediately that the pots were ancient. After carefully cleaning them he could see that most of them had contained perfumes and other valuable materials which were suitable for the grave of an important person. All of these things had long since lost their smell. Everything about them was dry, old and dead: there was nothing that made any of the pots different from hundreds of pots he had seen before. Harry was disappointed. There was nothing worth taking. Nothing. He decided to clear up.

As Harry turned, he did something he had never done before - he knocked over one of the

pots and broke it. He was annoyed with himself for being so careless and bent down to pick up the pieces.

The pot had been very plain and tightly shut up. All of the other pots had open tops. But not this one. Now that it was broken he could see that there had been something inside. It was a small, thin pipe about the length of his little finger. It was made of clay — the same stuff as the pots. He picked it up. It looked like a musical instrument, some kind of whistle for a child to blow into, perhaps? It might have some interest.

Harry decided the whistle would be worth taking home to look at. He put it into the pocket of his cotton jacket.

He told his professor about the broken pot but not about his whistle. He already thought about it as being *his* whistle.

'That's too bad,' said Professor Teo, 'but I don't suppose it was of much importance. What did you make of it, Harry?'

'Just an ordinary, plain pot,' said Harry. 'Nothing special. I can put it back together again but, really, it's no great loss. I can keep the pieces for you, if you like.'

The professor nodded. 'Yes, do that, Harry. We've been finding out a few things about the man whose grave it was. He appears to have been some kind of priest or medicineman. It seems a bit odd that his grave was so hidden. I wonder why?'

On his way home, Harry forgot about the clay whistle in his pocket. He stopped for a coffee in a noisy shopping

centre. As he searched his pockets for money, he felt the whistle in his pocket. When he had sat at his table he took it out to look at. It was still dirty. He gently cleared away the dirt. There was something written on the whistle. The marks looked like writing. He looked more closely and recognised some old Chinese writing. There was very little of it. All it said was: BE STILL.

Be still? How extraordinary. What did it mean? He looked at the whistle again. It was the kind that one blew from the top, like a football whistle. He wondered if it would still work. The thought came into his mind that he wanted to blow it. He wanted to very much. The whistle had not been blown since it had been placed in the pot all those years before. He would blow it. It was small - it would not make much noise. Nobody would notice. So he put it to his mouth and blew.

To his surprise, the whistle gave a thin, clear note that was louder than he expected.

Then there was silence. Complete silence.

Harry noticed something else, too. Everything was still. Nothing was moving. No noise, no movement.

Nothing.

People who had been walking were frozen in mid-step, like statues. They were as still as photographs.

But they weren't photographs. They were real people. Frozen people. Harry's eyes opened wide with surprise. He couldn't believe it. This should not be happening.

But it was. He looked around and saw frozen smiles, frozen steps, a fly frozen in flight, a ball thrown by a child which lay frozen above the hand which was waiting to catch it.

And all the while a total, perfect silence.

Harry sat down again. He could hardly think. How could he make sense of this? This had happened after he had blown the whistle. Had the whistle done this? What would happen if he blew it again? He certainly didn't want things to remain as they were!

He blew the whistle again. Once again it gave its thin, clear note.

All at once the normal world returned. Normal sounds, normal movement. The fly flew, the ball was caught, people laughed and talked.

It was as if nothing had happened.

Harry was shaken. He put the whistle in his pocket. He would have to think about this. He would have to think hard.

But by the time Harry had got home he had somehow persuaded himself that he had imagined everything. He felt better after a good supper and some TV. It had all been a waking dream. He was tired, that's all. He just needed a good night's sleep.

And so he slept. But his sleep was troubled and his dreams were full of shadows.

Harry went back to work the next day. He found nothing interesting. That's what he told Professor Teo.

Are you certain, Harry?' asked the professor. 'Whoever buried this man was afraid of him, that's for sure. His body was covered in pieces of paper with words on them. Words which were meant to keep harm away. Strange.'

Harry thought about the whistle. It was still in his pocket.

'I'm certain, Professor,' said Harry. 'I found nothing unusual. Nothing at all.'

Harry didn't drive. He usually got the bus home but sometimes he liked to walk. That evening he walked. He liked to look at the shops in Orchard Road — one of Singapore's busiest shopping areas. There were antique shops which sold beautiful old pots, maps and other things that his heart was hungry for. But he could not afford them. Not on his salary.

His favourite shop sold the most expensive things. He liked the small, beautifully made figures made from apple-green jade stone. They cost a lot of money but he liked to look. Sometimes he would ask if he could examine a piece, as if he were going to buy one of them. Of course, he never did. But he loved the feel of the costly jade in his hands.

He found himself in the shop again. It was full of the things that he, as an archaeologist, truly cared for. Yet they would be sold to empty-headed tourists who had no idea of their real value or beauty. It wasn't fair.

Without thinking, he took out the whistle and blew it. He hadn't planned to - it just seemed a natural thing to do.

And then there was silence. All was still.

Harry felt afraid but excited. So it had *not* been a dream! It *had* happened!

He saw the shopkeeper standing with his mouth open, looking stupid. A customer was pointing something out, his finger stuck in the air. None of them moved.

Harry decided he would look at some jade while they were all still. He took his favourite piece from the shop — a small jade dragon. It was very old and beautifully made. It was lovely. Why shouldn't he have it?

The thought at first alarmed him. This was not the same as taking things from the university. Nobody even noticed if he took anything there. Here he would be stealing, just like any thief.

He looked around at the frozen world. This was surely meant to be. The whistle had come to *him*. He should use it. Why not? It was only right. It was far better that such beauty should go to him rather than stupid people with more money than sense. It was only fair.

But he would have to do it right. If he was the last one to be seen with the jade dragon he would be looked for once it had gone. He blew the whistle and the world moved again. He waited for a while, then went to the shopkeeper and asked to see it.

'It's a fine piece of work, sir,' the shopkeeper told him. 'And only twenty thousand dollars.'

'It is lovely,' said Harry as he held it in his hands. He wanted it. He would have it. But he made a point of handing it back so that other customers - and the video cameras set up in the shop - could see him do it. 'Thanks for letting me look but I'm afraid that's all I can afford to do just now,' he said to the shopkeeper.

He walked out of the shop, into the shopping centre, out of sight of the shopkeeper. He sat down on a nearby seat, took out the whistle and blew.

The whole shopping centre went still and silent.

Harry felt more excited than he had ever felt in his life. He could walk into any shop he liked and just take whatever he wanted. Anything at all. And nobody would see him. It was perfect.

But, for the time being, he would just take the jade. He walked back into the shop, took the

dragon from its place on the shelf, put it into his pocket and walked out of the shop. He went back to his seat and blew the whistle once more. The shopping centre came back to life. Movement and sound returned. He had done it.

And who could blame Harry Chen for the disappearance of the jade? After all, the shopkeeper had seen him leave after he had returned the jade. So had the cameras in the shop. It had been easy.

As he walked home he felt like a god. The little jade dragon was the best thing in Harry's collection. He kept all his things in a rosewood box. He would soon need a bigger box.

And, as Harry slept that night, he dreamed that the whole world was still and he was the only moving thing in it. He and the shadows.

The next day Harry thought that he would see what the whistle could do. He decided to try it out at work. Perhaps on that old fool, Professor Teo. But, whatever he did, he must not draw attention to himself or the whistle. He was sure of that. It was *his* whistle and he did not want to lose it. Harry was used to asking questions about things. It was what archaeologists did. It was part of the job. He wanted

to find out more about the whistle. The first thing he wanted to find out about was this: did the whistle simply stop things moving or did it, in some way, stop time itself?

It was important to know. He didn't want people to notice that they'd lost time. That would be a problem. But if time had stood still there would be no problem. They wouldn't even know about it.

Professor Teo came into Harry's office. This could be his chance to test the whistle.

'Harry,' said the professor. 'I've got some news about our grave.'

'News, professor?' asked Harry.

'Yes,' said the Professor. 'We've been in touch with a local Chinese priest who knows all about this kind of thing. But it wasn't easy. He had to look in the oldest books he could find before he could tell us who this man was. And I was right, it is all rather strange, to say the least.'

Harry felt a sudden coldness run down his back.

'So who was he, Professor?' asked Harry.

'His name,' said the professor, 'was Lou Foo, which means "the tiger". He was a priest who was thrown out by the other priests.'

'Why?' asked Harry.

'The priest who told us this wouldn't say why, exactly,' continued the professor, 'but I think this Lou Foo must have done some very bad things. The priest even warned us to be careful, even though this man has been dead for all these years!' Professor Teo laughed. 'Honesdy! You'd think he was going to rise from the dead the way that priest talked about him! Still, it all makes our job that bit more interesting, doesn't it, Harry?'

Normally Harry would have laughed at such things along with the Professor. But his throat felt tight and dry for some reason.

'Er... I suppose so, professor,' he answered nervously.

Professor Teo turned to look out of the window, a habit of his. Harry knew that this was his moment to try out the whistle. While the professor wasn't looking, he took out the whistle and blew it.

Then all became still. All became silent.

Harry clapped his hands in front of the professor, shouted at him and waved his hands in front of his face. Professor Teo did nothing. He was like a figure made of stone. Exactly as expected. Harry then waited for exactly five minutes — he counted the seconds himself - before blowing the whistle again. The world of sound and movement returned and the professor turned towards him.

'Is everything all right, professor?' asked Harry.

'Of course, Harry. You know I don't believe any of that kind of rubbish. I'm fine,' the professor told him.

'No,' said Harry. 'I mean, you didn't hear anything just then, did you?'

'Only the birds and the traffic, Harry,' said Professor Teo. 'Was I meant to?'

'No, of course not,' said Harry. 'It must have been my ears making funny sounds. I have a bit of a cold and it gets to my ears as well. Sorry.'

'Well, if you are unwell you must rest, Harry. Take care,' said the professor as he left the room.

Harry quickly went to the telephone to call the speaking clock. When he put the telephone down he knew. No time had passed while the professor had been still. No time - anywhere. The five minutes he had counted had never happened to anybody but himself. When he blew the whistle he must have been outside time in some way. So the whistle didn't actually stop movement or sound.

It stopped Time itself.

The other priests must have known what this man Lou Foo had discovered. No wonder they threw him out. The way he'd been put in a grave that was more like a prison of stone . . . had he died naturally? Harry didn't care, for now Lou Foo's secret was his!

Harry felt something he had never felt before. He felt powerful. And his heart warmed when he thought of all the things that were now possible for him. He could now use the whistle to get himself money, knowledge - anything in the world that he wanted. For he, Harry Chen, had power over Time itself.

Harry did not use the whistle any more that day. When he got home he rested well. He would need to plan things carefully. Nobody else must know his secret. Harry Chen had been given a great gift and so Harry Chen would use it. Nobody else. It was only fair.

Harry thought carefully about how best to use the whistle. After all, he couldn't use it to actually see in the future. That was unfortunate. If he knew the names of winning horses or could find out the lucky numbers in the lottery he need never worry about money again. Never mind.

Best to start with small things before trying out his discovery on anything big. That would be best. But what should he do first?

He decided he would look around his favourite shops for all the things he could never afford before but had always wanted. Just the small, beautiful things he had always loved. Things small enough to carry. Then he would steal them.

It was the evening of the next day. It was dark outside but the shopping centre was brightly lit, as usual. Harry had already had a good look around. He knew what he wanted and had his bag with him, ready to put his 'shopping' in. He had taken the day off work - hadn't Professor Teo himself told him to take some rest? He had earned a break and he was going to make sure he enjoyed it.

Harry decided to have a coffee at his usual cafe before making a start. After all, he thought, there was no hurry! As he relaxed over his coffee he smiled at the tourists who were at the next table putting more film into their camera. The man looked fat and rich — just the type of tourist he had always disliked. The woman smiled back like the silly, simple thing she was. The fools. What did they know? He could rob them of everything and they wouldn't know it. But that would be a waste of time. He had better things to do. And there was, after all, plenty of time!

Harry finished his coffee and stood up. It was time to begin. He put his hand into his pocket and took out the whistle. He felt like a child at Christmas who was just about to open his presents. Harry Chen's time had come, at last!

He put the whistle to his mouth and blew. But, as he blew, there was a brilliant, blinding light that shot through his eyes. He dropped the whistle in his confusion. The light did not go away.

It took him a few moments before he realised what had happened. He walked away from his table to see the stupid tourist taking a picture of his stupid wife using the flash from his camera — just as he had blown his whistle. The bright flash was frozen in time. That was all: It was just

a camera. But he had dropped the whistle.

He had to find it. He began to look around the bright stillness which was all about him. Then he felt something break beneath the weight of his shoe. He looked down. The whistle lay in pieces.

His heart seemed to rise to his mouth as he realised what had happened. And the whistle lay in tiny pieces on the ground. Harry knew, as soon as he saw it, that it was too difficult even for him to repair. He was stuck there.

Harry tried shouting at the still-smiling tourist, at the waitress, at everybody he saw. But it was useless. They could not hear him. They could not see him. He might just as well not be there. He did not know whether time had stopped for the world or just for Harry Chen. And for how long? Would he live there always, with no future and no past? Would he die there?

These thoughts were passing through his mind as he considered the broken remains of the whistle. Only one part could be recognised. It was the part which had on it the words: BE STILL.

He felt afraid. He felt robbed. He felt a cold shadow pass over him. It just wasn't *fair*.