< A Soldier >

Every day, Xiao Ling had to pass a military barracks on his way to school. Carrying his school bag under his arm, he would run and leap along, until he got to the public square in front of the barracks, where he would slow down, in order to watch the soldiers at their morning drill. They stood lined up, immaculate under the morning sun, the brilliant shiny points of their guns and the deep yellow of their uniforms resplendent in the sunlight. Xiao Ling would stand to the side of them, and watch in silence. He admired and envied those soldiers terribly, and in his heart he resolved: <One day, when I'm grown up, I'm going to be a soldier too. Then I'll wear a uniform just like them, and carry a gun on my shoulder. I'm going to examine my gun very carefully, and find out exactly what it looks like inside.> This thought was with him every day, spinning round and round in his head.

One day, as every day, he was standing in front of the square, his gaze fixed on the activities of the soldiers, when he suddenly had a feeling that there was someone following him. He looked round, and saw that the soldier who had been guarding the gate to the barracks was standing behind him, and looking at him, smiling. Xiao Ling recoiled slightly, but did not quite dare to walk away. <What's your name, little school boy?> the soldier, still smiling, asked. <I'm called Xiao Ling,> Xiao Ling told him. <How old are you?> the soldier asked further. <I'm eight,> Xiao Ling replied. All at once, the soldier became lost in thought,
and, resting his two hands on his gun, he muttered to himself: <Surely, when I left home, our Sheng Er was all of eight years old too? >

While the soldier stood lost in thought, Xiao Ling slowly edged a few paces away, broke into a run, and bounded off. When eventually he looked back in the direction of the soldier, he saw that he was standing there as before, stupefied and still as a stone statue.

On his way home from school in the evening, Xiao Ling once more passed in front of the barracks. The soldier was sitting there, and when he saw Xiao Ling coming, he smiled and beckoned to him. Xiao Ling had no alternative but to obey, and the soldier then motioned to him to sit down by his side. Xiao Ling looked at his sallow complexion, and the deep gaze of his eyes, and now saw after all that this was a very gentle man. Gradually, he began to feel less afraid, and eventually plucked up the courage to stretch out his hand and clutch at the soldier’s gun. The soldier smiled, and handed it over to him. Xiao Ling was delighted. He bent over the gun, and became absorbed in playing with it. After a while, he lifted his head and looked up, only to find the soldier once again lost in thought, just as he was that morning.

From this time on, the two of them became the best of friends. The soldier even gave Xiao Ling a nickname—he called him <Sheng Er>—and Xiao Ling even answered to it. Every morning and every evening, whenever he passed the barracks, Xiao Ling made a point of going to play with the gun; and the soldier was always, without fail, in front of the barracks, waiting for him. When they met, they never actually said very much to each other. Xiao Ling just played on his own with the gun, and the soldier just sat to one side, watching him.

Xiao Ling was, however, only a child, and after a while, he became tired of playing with that cumbersome gun. Now, when he passed by the barracks, he no longer went to visit his old friend. He even began to detest the soldier when on occasions he tried to follow him. Xiao Ling no longer even dared to go and watch the morning drill, for fear of meeting his soldier, and if he saw him appearing in the distance, he would immediately run away.

The poor soldier! From then on, he could no longer enjoy the company of that innocent, sweet child. Yet, what right did he have to ask him to come as before? For his pretend Sheng Er was really not, after all, his son.

Yet still he waited there the same as ever, every morning and every evening, hiding behind a tree, for fear of frightening Xiao Ling away. From a distance, he would watch Xiao Ling come running and leaping along, and then pass merrily by. When it seemed that Xiao Ling had well and truly passed him by, the soldier would slowly creep round from behind the tree, and stand with his two hands resting on his gun, staring after Xiao Ling’s receding figure; and the wind blowing in his face would draw forth a few bitter tears—

This is how he was nearly every single day, until quite unknowingly the days turned into easily several months.

Then early one morning, Xiao Ling was about to go to school as usual. Just as he opened the front door, an object on the ground outside suddenly toppled towards him. As he stared down
at it, he saw that — of course — it was a small, wooden gun. The handle was painted red, and it was extremely beautiful. It had a piece of paper attached to it, which read: <For Sheng Er — something for you to play with. From your old friend who loves you — >

Xiao Ling took hold of the gun tightly in his hands, turning his thoughts over and over in his mind. It was easy enough to understand. All at once, he lifted the gun high above his head, and ran like the wind to the public square.

The regiment had already moved on, and the barracks stood empty — Now the person standing in front of the barracks, his two hands resting on his gun, and staring deep in thought with tears in his eyes, was not that sallow-faced, gentle soldier, but innocent and sweet Xiao Ling.

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<From An Army Officer’s Logbook>

The clouds of war are gathering, the order to mobilize has been given, and I myself am deeply confused, understanding nothing. Soon I will be greeting the enemy at the front, soon I will be face to face with that merciless gunfire. Whether I kill others or others kill me, it really makes no difference. Yet the sacrifice, the heroism, who is it all for? No one can say — and that is the greatest pity of it. Whether I die or others die, it matters as little as the death of a dog. Oh, what on earth is it all about!

My father stands at the front door, a gentle, soughing breeze blowing his white hair, dishevelling it. He leans on my younger sister, as they stand there together in utter silence. — Ah! This cannot be the scene of a family farewell to a son going off to the army. Why is there not the slightest word of encouragement, not the slightest expression of sorrow. I know! Where indeed are the words of encouragement for an unjust recourse to war? How pitiable it all is! Should they try to console me? Or should I try to console them? Having lain awake all last night searching for a few words of comfort, how is it now that I can no longer bring myself to say them? There is no more that can be said. I must simply go.
As soon as I get myself through the door and out into the street, I board the awaiting rickshaw. That scene of a moment ago remains inbedded in my mind, that solitary scene of wretchedness. Perhaps this really is the last time of parting, the last time of meeting. I merely question with deep regret why I ever first entered that army school, when the function of war was always only this, the objective of war always none other than this!

I come across several friends along the way, chatting as they walk, their faces revealing an intense fierceness. They suddenly look up and catch sight of me, but they do not call out. They just whisper something quietly among themselves, and fix me with a sneering gaze. We continue on our separate ways, and I do not understand why they shun me, why they sneer at me. Until, all at once, I remember my new position. Oh, what has become of that glorious soldier? Clearly he is now a running dog of the warlords. Where have all my ordinary aspirations gone? How could I stoop so low as to do this despicable thing? How can I be worthy of my friends, and how can I be worthy of myself? —

I lift my head and realize that I have already arrived at the train station. My subordinates are there waiting for me, lined up, guns poised, ready to go! I must say a few words to them, make an effort to raise their spirits. Smiling, I face them, but as I begin to utter the first few words that have just come to me: <As soldiers, it is our bounden duty,> I feel my heart stricken, my face redden. How can I possibly continue? How can I possibly ….. my words fail, as their eyes fix upon me, their eyes filled with tears. We all understand each other in our hearts, all have compassion for one another; and yet we must go on to fight to the death.

For a transient moment all is silent. I must try to contain my tears. I wave my hand and cry out: <Let’s go and find the platform!>

We pass through several stations, and catch sight of countless yellow-uniformed soldiers and officers, all hastening on and off trains, each concerned only for himself. The locomotive resounds with a constant clicking, making our pitiful silence all the more apparent. The plains on either side flash by like lightning, a vast stretch of earth, carrying my thoughts along, spinning round and round incessantly. In my heart, I still cannot believe it; we are now on our way to war. I recall how I used to feel as a soldier ready to die for my country. What was the
excitement and exhilaration I felt in facing the enemy, what was that urge to sing out at the top of my voice? How is it that dying on the battlefield is thought to be glorious; what kind of praise does one deserve for returning victorious? Ever since I observed the war in Europe, and saw the painful predicament of the soldiers there, I have gradually come to feel the inhumaness of war; but I never realized, as I do now, that not only is it inhuman, but that it is worthless. Now I see these inhuman and worthless deeds, which we commit so earnestly, and all for the sake of a handful of warmongers. — It is all too worthless for words.

The trenches are dug, and I can faintly see the enemy, their banners fluttering. I have heard that their officer is none other than Zhong Ping — my uncle’s son, my brother; we only just parted company a month ago. A few days ago he wrote to me, asking when I would be able to go and visit him. I never thought that we would be meeting on the battlefield. Oh, the pity of it! How can I bear to attack him? How can he bear to attack me? If we were fighting in the name of truth and justice, we should naturally have no cause for misgivings; if we were fighting of our own free will, there should also be no cause for concern. But what actually are we fighting for now?

We are all here in the battlefield, unable to go into action, desperately hoping still for some slim chance of mediation. My heart is slightly calmer, though it is merely the violent storm that restrains us. The military supplies officer has been delayed; our provisions are inadequate. How can we possibly last out? How can I possibly expect my soldiers to fight on an empty stomach?

Why am I lying here? Why can’t I lift my head? Why does my whole body feel numb? What are these snow-white walls, these windows shaded by a mass of green. This isn’t the battlefield! — Now I remember. I have already been at war, and I have been injured. This is a hospital. That evening it was raining heavily, and Zhong Ping’s troops had crossed the battle-line unknown to us. We were awoken by a blast of gunfire, and then suddenly my senses were in disarray. All I could bring myself to do was to grab hold of my officer’s sword, and stand out in the rain. My ears were full of the sound of rain, of gunfire, and of loud cries. Then, all of a sudden, there was a loud quaking sound, and I leapt up. All at once the left side of my body became numb, and I collapsed on the rain-soaked ground. It seemed as though a whole sea of water was flowing through my brain. After a while, there was a flash of light like a
bright flame, and I heard someone shout: <Their Commanding Officer’s over here!> And then somebody bent over and looked at me. <Ah! Brother Zhong Ping!> Weeping, he took my hand. I wept also, and then felt myself drifting away, until I knew no more.

There is no doubt about it, I have been wounded. Where is Zhong Ping? Is he here? Where on earth am I?

A male nurse enters the room, sees that I am awake, and then promptly comes over to me. I want to ask him something, but he just smiles and shakes his head, motioning that I should not speak. He simply lowers his head to examine my wounds. I follow the movement of his hands with my eyes, and all at once my blood freezes — my left arm and leg are gone. I am a cripple…… I desperately want to sit up! I use all the strength I have to try torip the bandages from my wounds. I pound at my head! I scream! I sob! The nurse is frightened, and at a loss what to do. He stands to one side of me, watching stupefied. He waits until my fit resolves into weeping, and then comes to offer some words of support. I point to the door, ordering him to go away. I won’t listen to him. I won’t listen to anyone. It’s all over! Over! I have become a cripple! If only I had died!……

No sooner do I gain awareness, no sooner do I open my eyes, than I remember the scene of a moment before. I am devastated. My life is finished!

Piteously I yell, over and over again: <Someone! I beg you! Bring me some poison! Let me die!> Just then, the door opens. Zhong Ping comes in. His face is ashen, and his left arm is bandaged, hanging in a sling around his neck. Slowly, two or three steps at a time, he makes his way towards the foot of my bed. He struggles it seems for hours to try to find the words to console me: <Brother! I …..> We both sob silently. I lie there quietly, and in my ears is only the rustling of the leaves on the trees outside, and the sound of Zhong Ping’s choking grief, as his tears fall onto my face. Now I recall a day in my boyhood, when Zhong Ping and I were playing together. Each of us had a small wooden gun, charged with sand, and we hid behind trees, and shot at each other. Suddenly, he fired a shot in my face, sending sand flying up in my eyes, so that I could not see. I flung my own gun down and cried. Zhong Ping rushed over, and, wiping my eyes for me, endeavoured to cheer me up: <Little brother, don’t cry! We’ll never play soldiers again!> The scenes of this episode pass one by one before my eyes like slides in a film show — I feel a deep sense of misery and despair. Oh, Zhong Ping! I only beseech you to sit with me here for ever! We will never play soldiers again!
I have received a piece of joyful news: the news that no longer need I suffer a life as a cripple. I am to go to a new world, a world filled with only <peace.>, <compassion> and <love.>. All the painful anxiety of the day has gone from me.

You poor warmongers! I do not hate you! I merely pity you! Oh, Zhong Ping! I will not commemorate your memory; I will only love you! Father, sister, Goodbye!

The history of the world turns page by page, like a book, and what follows after is only ……

<And the Lord will wipe away all their tears; no longer will there be any death, or any grief, or any wailing, or any pain; because in the end, all things pass.>

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< San Er >

San Er carried a large basket on his back, and clutched a branch with a metal hook attached to it in his hand. He walked with body bent and head hung low, but his eyes incessantly peered around him. It was already beginning to get dark, but he would not go home until he had picked up a few more scraps of paper and bits of rag, and packed as many as he could into his basket.

After walking a little way, he came to a public square, at the edge of which a large crowd of people were gathered. Presuming that the object of their attention must be soldiers engaged in target practice, San Er made his way to the front of the crowd. He caught sight of several soldiers lined up one behind the other, with an officer at their side. The soldier at the front of the line was kneeling on one knee, with his rifle poised at the ready. He took aim at the iron post, and then, with a metallic ringing sound, the bullet hit its target, ricocheting towards the edge of the square. All of a sudden, it occurred to San Er to go and pick up the bullet. After all, it would fetch a few coppers, and surely be worth more than scraps of paper and bits of rag.
He leaned forward, and slowly lifted the bullet up with his hook. The soldier who had shot the bullet cast a glance at him, but said nothing. San Er accordingly squatted down, scooped up the bullet, and tucked it inside his garment.

Then, one after another, he gathered up seven or eight bullets. No one paid any attention to him, let alone try to stop him. He was delighted.

After a while, several other children came along. When they saw San Er busy collecting up bullets, they in turn descended upon the square. San Er turned round and caught sight of them. Afraid that they might get to the bullets before him, he rushed in the direction of the shooting post.

All at once, a piteous cry was heard. San Er had been struck by a bullet. Boy and basket were sent spinning in the air, and then collapsed in a heap on the ground.

For a moment, the officer who had been supervising the target practice appeared alarmed. Losing no time to regain his composure, however, he made his way calmly towards the boy. The crowd then closed in, and someone shouted out: <San Er's in bad shape! Better go and get his family right away!>

Before long, San Er's mother, in tears, came rushing through the crowd to where her son lay, and lifted him up from the ground in her arms. The officer kicked San Er's basket out of his way, and walked off with his head hung low. The sight of San Er's face as white as paper, and the incessant flow of blood pouring out from a hole torn in the front of his garment had been enough. <How can our children ever hope to survive in this world?> San Er's mother sobbed. <If my son dies, I'll make sure you gentlemen pay for it with your own lives!> The officer sneered at her, and pointed with his bayonet to a wooden signboard standing at the edge of the square: <No entry to unauthorized persons> Isn't it written clearly enough for you? Your children bring disaster upon themselves. How can you hold us responsible? Whose fault is it that he can't read?!

Just as it was beginning to seem that they were not getting anywhere, San Er suddenly gritted his teeth, and struggled to a standing position. He then scooped up a pile of torn paper from the ground, and put it back in his basket. He gave another struggle to get the basket on his back, and tugging at his mother said: <Ma, let's go ...... let's go home!> But his mother was still sobbing and wailing, and only when San Er himself began to stagger away, did she hasten to follow after him.

As soon as they got inside the house, San Er put down his basket, and flopped down on the floor. His eyes were closed, and he kept rubbing his stomach with both hands. His breath was already very shallow.

By now the doorway was filled with people, and yet more neighbours were still squeezing their way in. <Go and buy a strip of plaster to stick on the wound!> someone said. <It might stop the bleeding!> <If I were you, I'd take him to the foreign hospital,> someone else said. <Last year, our uncle ...... >
All of a sudden, the crowd divided, and a soldier made his way into the house. In his hand he held a small paper roll. <Here’s twenty <yuan>.,> he announced. <It’s from our squadron leader for your child.> At this, San Er opened his eyes, stretched out a hand covered with blood, and took the note. Handing it over to his mother, he said: <Mother, you take it – it’s for you ……> As she took the money from him, she was overcome by a fit of loud and painful wailing. The soldier hurriedly left; but by the time he was gone —— San Er was already dead!

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