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The division of horsemen with their red coats, blue trousers and glossy black topknots looked splendid as they thundered into the town of Lizhou. But the citizens shrieked and fled, for the colourful uniforms marked the invaders as the dreaded Tai Ping Revolutionary Army.

The commander of the Army was Hong Xiu Quan, the Heavenly King, who believed himself to be the Younger Brother of Jesus Christ. He also believed that his Older Brother had sent him to smash the corrupt Ching Dynasty and its Imperial Court and to build in its stead the Heavenly City of Eternal Peace. Hong's army was relentlessly cruel in striving to achieve that goal.

But for Son Shui the brutal arrival of the army in Lizhou couldn't have been more welcome. He heard them gallop into the town with their battle shrieks, but he could not see them until a section of horsemen halted right in front of him. The corporal in charge drew his sword, thrusting the point onto Son Shui's cheek.

'Why are you wearing the *cangue*?' the corporal asked with a sneer.

The *cangue* was a collar made by the devil himself. It was a square wooden board out of which Son Shui's head protruded; it was so large his hands could not reach his mouth and so heavy he could barely stand. Thus encumbered, he had been placed on the street for public display. He could eat only when a kindly passer-by popped some food into his mouth, and drink only when someone gave him water. There were few kindly passers-by in Lizhou. Prisoners wearing the *cangue* usually did not last long. They died of starvation, thirst or simple exhaustion, as Son Shui well knew.

‘B-because I’m an enemy of the Imperial Court,’ Son Shui croaked. It sounded better than the truth, which was that he had been caught pickpocketing.

‘Join our Army or die.’

‘I’ll j-join,’ whispered Son Shui, barely able to move his cracked, dry lips.

‘Your name?’

‘Son Shui.’

A horseman who understood Hakka burst out laughing. ‘Son Shui? That’s no name for a soldier in the terrible army of our Heavenly King! Son Shui means “Calm Water”,’ he explained to the corporal.

Exhausted and starving as he was, Son Shui’s brain moved swiftly. ‘But my professional name is Wu Lei, “The Fox”. I too am as cunning and as swift to the kill as a fox.’

‘You look neither cunning nor swift right now, friend,’ the corporal chuckled. ‘But you’ll do. Release him, feed him and give him a uniform.’

Wu Lei revelled in being a soldier. He idolised his divine leader, the Heavenly King; he loved the discipline required by the Revolutionary Army. He could take out his own past hurts and humiliations, which were considerable, on the captured soldiers of the Imperial Army and on the villagers who supported the Imperial Manchus.

Wu Lei’s parents had been so poor that they had sold him at a tender age to a rich merchant. The man had treated the poor child cruelly, forcing him to work long hours and beating him savagely when he fell asleep on the job from sheer exhaustion. Wu Lei – the then Son Shui – aged only ten escaped one night through an unlocked window, after which he supported himself on the streets by thieving and pickpocketing. He once tried to pickpocket a Christian missionary but the latter was too quick: he seized the boy’s thin wrist, holding him tightly. The missionary, an Englishman from the London Missionary Society, was a kind man. When he heard Wu Lei’s story, his heart went out to the little chap. He took him back to his school for ragged orphans.

Wu Lei stayed with the mission for only as long as was necessary to learn what he needed to learn in order to pursue his chosen profession of thief and confidence trickster. He learned to talk well and convincingly in English, Mandarin and Cantonese, in addition to his native Hakka, and to write in Chinese and English. He ignored his other school subjects, including Divinity, which he was pleased to note exasperated his saviour mightily. His saviour would be even more exasperated, Wu Lei grinned to himself as he ran through the gates of the school for the last time, when he discovered the loss of a gold statuette of Jesus The Good Shepherd, encrusted with precious stones, that had minutes previously been occupying pride of place in the missionary's study.

Wu Lei's education at the mission school had provided a valuable preparation for a Tai Ping soldier.

The Manchu Imperial Army eventually defeated the Tai Ping Revolutionaries. In 1864, Hong Xiu Quan, the Heavenly King, committed suicide. When the Revolutionary Army was officially no more, it broke up into undisciplined packs of wild dogs, most of the Tai Ping soldiers being, like Wu Lei himself, dislocated criminals. They became known as 'Hairy Thieves', after the topknots they still retained. The thieves hunted in packs, and like wild dogs, each pack had a hierarchy. Wu Lei's less than engaging habits swiftly saw him as bottom dog in his pack. His fellow curs teased him mercilessly.

'Wu Lei?' they laughed. 'You? No, not Wu *Lei*, The Fox, but Wu *Ying*, The Fly! That's you. You buzz around annoying us, your so-called comrades. You lie to us. You feed on whatever you can, just like a dirty fly. So Wu *Ying* you are.'

And Wu *Ying* he remained. In fact, he came to like the name because it enabled him to enact an ancient Chinese saying: *cang ying bu ding feng dan* (flies do not infest an egg that has no cracks). Wu *Ying* was continually on the lookout for cracked eggs. He buzzed around people, feeding off their exuding weaknesses.

And even when there was nothing to be gained, he found irritating people an agreeable pastime in itself.

Hong Xiu Quan had commanded the Tai Ping Revolutionary Army with the aid of strategies and maxims drawn from the ancients. He had two favourites: *fan jian ji* (plan for greatest disharmony) and *fu chao zhi xia wu wan luan* (when you overturn the nest leave no eggs intact). When the packs of Hairy Thieves continued their now politically pointless rape and pillage of the countryside, they applied these strategies ruthlessly.

The village of Kam Fu Tsuen in Kwongtung Province was the next nest that Wu Ying's pack planned to overturn. Only eight horsemen remained from the original platoon but they were more than enough to ransack a village if they followed another aphorism: *gong qi wu bei* (take the enemy by surprise). With hearts lusting for blood and loins aching for violent release, the Hairy Thieves rode cautiously under cover to regroup in line behind a tree, only a couple of minutes' fierce riding from the village gate. The leader raised aloft the tattered black silk flag affixed to his lance, as if to perpetuate the illusion they were still a military unit. Each horseman read the eyes of his neighbour and saw hot agreement. The leader nodded. His lance now in the attack position, he screamed 'EEE-YAAAAaaaa!' as his horse leapt forward. The others immediately took up the cry, their horses' hooves pounding like volleys of cannon as they stormed the village.

Two bloody and supremely satisfying hours later, seven horsemen rode eastwards out of Kam Fu Tsuen, their saddles laden with booty, each dwelling on their own particular rewards and pleasures of the recent hunt. The eighth horsemen, Wu Ying, was charged as underdog with the task of remaining to check that no intact eggs remained. As Wu Ying was returning to catch up with the others, a little boy stumbled into Wu Ying's path. The boy froze, arms thrust in front of him, palms forward, as if to push the horrific image of a blood-soaked soldier away. Wu Ying laughed, drew his sword, and bent low in the saddle to slaughter the little insect where he stood.

The boy stared at him with huge eyes, his head tilted backwards, his little arms rigid, his body paralyzed. Wu Ying leaned forward and touched him delicately on the cheek with the blood-wet blade of his sword, marking the spot where he might make an initial satisfying slash.

Then he had a better idea. 'No, little fellow, I won't kill you now. You go back home. See what we have done, ha ha!'

And with that he galloped off, forgetting he had disobeyed the solemn maxim endorsed by the Heavenly King.

He had left one egg intact.