CITY COUSIN

AND OTHER STORIES

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Contents

City Cousin

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A new moon hung over the rooftops as several girls, returning home at sunset, called to each other to go to Maoya's house.

Merry, yet serious, they were a noisy band of middle-school graduates. "Why don't you come out and see us, Maoya?" came one insistent voice.

"Is she putting on airs now that she's become an old hand?" came another voice, quite shrill. This happy and excited group flocked around another girl who was in the courtyard.

The girl was Maoya. After graduating from the primary school in town she hadn't gone to the county middle school as most of her friends had, but had come back home to the farm. Maoya had proved to be not only a skilled farmer but was known in the village as being fond of talking and laughing.

She could out-talk many a young man. But now she was mute, unable to hold her own against these friends of hers since childhood.

Then the eldest of the girls, who seemed to be their spokesman, asked for quiet, suppressed her own smile and declared in all seriousness: "Maoya, we've come home to work on the farm. We were talking about it on the train and thought we should organize a 'girls team.' We want you as team leader, to help us — teach us to do farm work, so that we too can help build our socialist new countryside!"

"You'll do that, won't you?" injected a girl who wore her short braids standing almost upright.

"For goodness' sake, is *that* all?" Maoya broke the solemnity with her laughter. "That's not so difficult."

"So you agree?" the girls pressed.

"I agree . . . . I agree to recommend someone to you."

"Ah, foxy, aren't you!" the girls shouted.

"You're the best farmer of all us village girls. Don't think we don't know!" the girl with the braids countered with a show of belligerence.

"My dear little bureaucrats," Maoya retorted, evading the threat, "that may have been true in the past. Now, there's a girl here who's a better farmer than I."

"Who is it?"

"Lien."

"Oh," the girls could only say, and looked at each other.

"It's not surprising that you don't know," Maoya explained, "because you've been away. Sit down, girls, and I'll tell you how it is."

The girls dropped onto anything in the courtyard that could serve as seats and waited for Maoya to begin.

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My cousin Lien hadn't given me a very good impression at our first meeting.

One summer day at noon, when I came home from the fields, I found a girl in the kitchen helping my mother get the meal. I leaned my hoe against the wall just inside the gate and called:

"Who's the guest, ma?"

My mother looked up from the wheat-cakes she was rolling. "When will you ever learn manners?" she said reprovingly. "Why, this is your cousin from the city."

I had heard that I had a cousin in the city, and that she was two years older than I, also that her name was Lien. Come to think of it, she should have finished senior middle school by now. I had never been to the city where she lived — it was in another county — and she hadn't come to visit us either, so we had never met. Now here she was at last. I began to size up this cousin of mine.

Lien was an attractive girl, slim, of medium height, and with a fresh, clear complexion. She smiled as

she came out to greet me, two long braids of fine hair reaching to her waist. She asked in a gentle voice:

"Just come off shift, cousin?"

"Come off shift!" — now there was a city dweller for you. The soft, intellectual type really made me squirm, but since it was a cousin I was meeting for the first time, I had to be polite.

At lunch I asked her: "What do you think of our Chiangchun Village, cousin?"

She smiled. "Very nice."

My mother stopped my next question. "That girl is forever boasting about our village," she told Lien. Then to me she said: "Lien is going to live here and work in our team. She'll know soon enough what our village is like. Now eat your lunch."

"Honest? Is that right?"

"Yes, cousin." Lien stopped plying her chopsticks and nodded. "I finished senior middle school, but I didn't try for college. I thought I ought to work for a year in the country first."

Lien obviously meant it, and my mother was serious too. I took another look at my city cousin. A slip of a girl like her. A couple of days in the village might be all right, but to "work for a year!"

That afternoon, when Lien said she'd work with me in the fields, my mother wasn't sure.

"What's the hurry, Lien? You've just come. We'll have a long chat here at home."

"Won't we have lots of time for chats later on, aunt?"

"You've come all this distance. You ought to rest."

"Why should I, if I'm not tired? When I am, I'll rest even without you telling me."

We were right in the middle of hoeing around the bean shoots. We girls were competing with the boys. What time was there for chatting? Without a word, I got another hoe out of the shed and took Lien off with me to the bean field.

Did you ever see anybody learning to hoe? It's really a sight. Actually, there isn't anything so hard about it, but Lien was more excited than a kid on her first day at school. It was as if she were starting a brand new life. Watching her with that hoe, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She swung the light little blade as if it weighed a ton, and it just wouldn't land where she aimed it. She hacked wildly for some time, knocking down bean shoots left and right, while the weeds remained standing. The poor girl didn't know where to put her feet. When she stood close, she couldn't swing the hoe; when she stepped back, she trampled the plants in the row behind.

"Why torture yourself, cousin?" I said. "Go take a rest under that tree."

Lien gave me a startled glance, then her face reddened. She turned and gazed at the patch she had just hoed. It looked as if the hens had been at it. Her smile was positively pathetic. But she got hold

of herself, wiped some of the sweat from her forehead, bit her lower lip, and went on hoeing.

After work, she walked home close to me. "What's the knack to this hoeing, cousin?" she asked.

We had beaten the boys that day, and I was feeling fine. I was much too absorbed, talking gaily with the other girls, to go into such questions. "I'll show you tomorrow," I put her off.

Either I wasn't a good teacher, or she wasn't a good pupil, for after the whole morning's teaching she was still as bad as the day before. Word reached us: "The boys have caught up." I was very irritated, and stopped bothering with her.

At noon, when we came home for lunch, our team leader Uncle Cheng-kang sent for me. In a serious voice, he said: "Lien has just come from the city. We must take pains to help her."

"I wasted a whole morning," I said, "and the boys caught up with us. They wouldn't have if I wasn't trying to help her. It's not my fault she can't learn."

"You've got to be patient," he said. "Lien's come to our village for training in answer to Chairman Mao's call, and that's taking a big step forward, isn't it? We poor and lower-middle peasants ought to help her willingly."

It was too hot to go back to the fields right after lunch, and the girls called for me to go with them and enjoy the cool under the willows south of the village. As I was going out the gate I remembered

Lien, and I shouted for her, but there was no answer. I looked in the house. She wasn't there.

"Where's Lien, ma?" I asked.

My mother looked up from washing dishes. "She was here a minute ago," she said.

That's funny, I thought. I noticed a small red-covered notebook open on the table. Lien had been writing in it for a long time before going to bed the previous night. Had she been writing again? There, on the first page in large characters was the sentence: "May you strike deep roots in our vast countryside and mature quickly."

It must be a diary she was keeping! Lien was probably very unhappy. I hadn't been very kind to her the past two days. The first time she'd ever been away from home, and she'd travelled quite a distance to come to our village, and I . . . . Why, she must be miserable. I got very upset.

"Isn't Lien around?" my mother asked.

I mumbled something, then dashed out. Peasants I asked on the road said they'd seen Lien leave the village going west. Probably looking for a quiet place for a good cry, I was really worried at the thought.

I looked for her everywhere — in the gully, the grove . . . , but she was nowhere to be found. I felt very sorry, standing there. Then, I happened to look off towards the bean field. Two people were there in the patch we'd hoed that morning, and one of them was Lien. I cut straight across the fields towards her, relieved.

Uncle Chen-kuei, the secretary of our Communist Party branch, was teaching her to hoe. He was very patient, and she was very attentive. I halted a good distance off, too embarrassed to hail them.

Lien turned around and smiled when she saw me. "So it's you, Maoya," she called.

She said it with such affection that it seemed she wasn't angry with me after all. I bounded forward and flung my arms around her neck.

It was a scorching hot day and the fields were like a steamer. Lien's face was as red as a boiled prawn; sweat poured off her. I grabbed her hoe.

"Let's go home, Lien," I urged, "I'll help you tomorrow." "It's too hot today."

But Lien refused to let go of the hoe. To the old Party secretary she said with a smile: "You go back with her, uncle. I know you're busy. I'll practise here by myself."

Uncle Chen-kuei agreed we should knock off. "Why not go home and cool off, Lien?" he suggested. "You can't swallow a whole meal down in one gulp."

"Are you out of your mind, Lien?" That was my mother, who had come to find us. "Let me see your hands," she ordered.

Lien put out her hands, palms up. They were red and blistered. One of the blisters had broken.

"It takes time to learn farming, child," my mother said reprovingly. "You're not supposed just to charge into it."

Uncle Chen-kuei added gently, "Go and rest, Lien. This won't do."

"But I've come here for training, and I mustn't be afraid of these things," she said, shooting a contemptuous glance first at her blisters and then at the scorching sun.

With that she turned to proceed with the hoeing. . . .

That night I happened to wake. It was very late, but Lien was still not asleep. She was lying on her back, her sore hands, which my mother had bandaged, folded over her chest and her dark eyes fixed on the ceiling. I called to her softly.

"Oh, you're awake too," she said. She sat up and smoothed her hair. "I've been thinking and thinking," she said in a low voice. "I just can't settle down."

"Don't worry, Lien," I comforted her. "You've only just come."

"I know," she replied. "But I've learned a lot here. While Uncle Chen-kuei was teaching me to hoe this noon, he told me of his childhood, when he was hired by the landlord to labour. Those scars on his back! He told me something of the bitter life of the poor and lower-middle peasants in the village under the landlord's cruel oppression and exploitation. It made my heart ache. I've been thinking how much class exploitation our elders suffered. They shed their blood and gave their lives in order to restore the state power back into the hands of the people; now it's up to us younger generation to build our motherland

well. How can I yield to hardship and quit just because learning's difficult? No. I cannot forget the Party's expectations and trust in us."

The moonlight pouring through the window shone on her proud, stubborn head. I was suddenly aware of the strong will that burned within Lien's slight frame.

With her determination, Lien learned to hoe that summer, and to reap and plough that autumn. She was like a locomotive with a full head of steam. Day or night, rain or shine, she kept on.

At the time, it seemed to me she was over-doing things. When the autumn sowing began, she asked me to teach her how to use the seeder! That's one of the trickiest and most tiring jobs in farming. None of us girls knew how.

"The boys in our team can manage," I said. "Why should we learn?"

Lien looked a little annoyed. "A peasant ought to be able to do everything in farming, and do it well."

"But that's the most complicated job of all," I explained.

"That's exactly why we should learn," she insisted. "Later on, our team will have a tractor, then a combine. They're even more complicated. Does that mean we girls aren't going to drive them?"

All right, I thought, you go ahead and learn. I went to the people in charge of the animals and equipment and talked them into lending me what I wanted. I returned leading an ox, with the seeder

on my shoulder and a basket of wheat seed in my hand.

Lien was delighted. She rolled up her sleeves excitedly and we went to a field north of the village that was ready for sowing. With me leading the ox and Lien handling the seeder, we set to work.

But we had no sooner started than our troubles began. If we rocked the seeder too gently the seed didn't fall through. If we shook it too violently it scattered wide of the furrow. If the ox plodded too slowly the planting was too dense. If the ox was too fast the guide-shares popped out.

Lien, in her excitement, pressed down too hard and one of the guide-shares hit a rock. There was a sharp crack as the metal tip snapped off.

I pulled the ox to a halt. "I told you we couldn't do it," I cried, "but you had to show off."

I peered back at the three crooked rows we had just seeded. I was upset, but Lien was paralysed. She stared, dumb-founded, at the broken guide-share. I didn't have the heart to say more.

"We've got lots of extra guide-shares," I consoled, pretending a calm I didn't feel. "It's nothing to worry about."

As luck would have it, Uncle Cheng-kang happened to pass our field on his way back from a meeting. He saw our crooked furrows and came running towards us, shouting: "Goodness me, is that any way to seed?" But when he saw the broken share tip, he was really angry. "You girls are mad," he fumed.

"Learning to use the seeder is all right, but you ought to get someone to teach you."

Lien was scared. I looked at Uncle Cheng-kang. "What are you getting excited about?" I asked. "It's only a guide-share. We've got plenty in the store-room."

"Generous, aren't you," he bellowed. "You're really generous. Of course our team's got spares. But how long would they last if everyone acted like you girls?"

Still shouting, he led off the ox, carrying the seeder and the basket of seed.

In the afternoon, he sent someone to teach Lien how to use the seeder. Lien finally learned, and it was really she who encouraged the rest of us to learn.

More and more of our commune members got to like Lien. They said she had spunk. Some people even said that she was the best farmer of all the girls in the village.

Naturally, I was glad that Lien was learning fast. But to claim that she was such a good farmer — I certainly couldn't accept that.

When the ploughing started last spring, I got up especially early the first day and picked myself a first-rate ox from the barn and a good plough from the store-room, and went off with the others to the fields. I was in high spirits.

How clear the sky is in early spring, how warm the sun! The soft breezes, the voices singing — it

really makes you feel wonderful. After the plots to be ploughed were assigned and we hitched up our oxen, I called out:

"Hey, comrades, let's have a competition and see who's the best farmer."

Lien nodded at me and smiled. She knew I had her in mind, but she seemed pleased nonetheless.

"Right," she shouted. "Whoever ploughs the best gets a prize."

Whips cracked, and over a dozen ploughs set out. I glanced at Lien. A whip in one hand and the other guiding the plough, she advanced proudly. Clumps of earth rose on one side of her plough share and arranged themselves in a neat row. Ploughing the length of the field five times up and back, Lien left the other girls far behind.

I couldn't pass her no matter how I tried, and I was very upset. I was born on a farm, and had been doing this work for many more years than she. Why was I behind? I simply had to pass her, or the reputation I had earned in the past two years would be ruined. I began leaving wider and wider spaces between my furrows.

When I had made three or four trips, Lien walked over to me.

"What in the world are you doing?" she demanded.

I halted my ox. "What's wrong?"

"You don't know!" She pointed indignantly at my patch. "Call that ploughing?"

I looked. I had left huge spaces between my rows. My face burned. "I won't do it any more," I mumbled.

"Never mind," she snapped. "Let's put a few more furrows in those gaps. We'll do it together."

Lien led her ox to my plot and ploughed side by side with me. "Yes," she sighed, "you too have this problem."

"What problem?" I asked.

"The problem of class stand, viewpoint and feelings," said she. "A person who is merely good at hoeing, ploughing, harrowing and harvesting isn't necessarily a good farmer. The important thing is to learn from the poor and lower-middle peasants their class stand, viewpoint and feelings. Remember that day when Uncle Cheng-kang saw the seeds wasted and the broken guide-share, he got angry with us. But we were quite indifferent. Again, one day on our way to the fields we saw some cow dung on the road, but we just passed it by. When Uncle Chen-kuei saw it he shovelled it onto the fields. Such things seem trifling, but they show that the poor and lower-middle peasants do not work for personal fame or gain. What do you think?"

I flushed. How right Lien was. Why are the uncles Chen-kuei and Cheng-kang always conscientious and earnest in everything they do? It's simply because they work for the collective, for socialism.

Lien had changed. Not only had her fine long braids been snipped off, but her fair face had filled