The Poor Relation · *Li Guowen*

MR. H., a new star on the literary horizon of X province. For the last few days, he has lost his appetite, and at night, he tosses about in bed, unable to sleep. The fact is, poor Mr. H. is suffering from writer's block. Everybody knows that H. made a name for himself on rural themes. The virgin work which brought him fame and recognition was based on the story of his poor cousin in his home village. Her list of misfortunes, her tears, her courage and forbearance amidst poverty and hardship had wrung the hearts of countless readers. Lately rural themes are back in vogue, but H. is silent. For some inexplicable reason, his fountain of inspiration has gone dry. Whenever he takes up his pen, his poor cousin and the bleak life of those bygone times come back to haunt him. So out of keeping with the current vogue of rural rags-to-riches stories. So frustrating. Of course H. strives to maintain a dignified silence. But to remain in the shade when so many new works are out in the sun is more than he can bear.

H. is despondent. Can he turn out nothing but sketches of his poor cousin? The impression she left on his mind was too deep, to the exclusion of everything else. In that remote poverty-stricken mountain village, cash is so rare that many families cannot even afford matting for their brick beds. And yet his cousin always managed to save something for him, a spark of tenderness which warmed his forlorn heart. Thus his style was formed, a touch of tenderness, slightly tinged with pathos. But this style is no longer to modern tastes.

Of course, he had anticipated competition. The literary scene is like a moving tide, one wave swallowing up another. "The literature of the wounded" had its day, love stories have come and gone, and now new types are emerging from the new era.

"I've made a late start. . . ." he had complained to his wife.

"It is hopeless," he sighs to himself. He remembers when he first read those stories of nouveaux-riches peasants, peasants who swagger into the city and stay in five-yuan-per-night hotels, peasants who actually dare to talk back to brigade leaders. He had been alerted. He had thought this might be a new trend. But he had been so busy, attending meetings, making speeches, talking about his own work, having lunch with visiting dignitaries, tapping sources of information for the latest Party directives, fulfilling

writing assignments from local magazines about the genesis of his own works, answering silly questions from amateur literary clubs about when and how he had "fallen in love with the Muses," meeting the unending demands of the rapacious local television stations for more "raw material" to adapt to the TV screen. And to cap it all, the Chinese department of the local teachers' college asked him to give a talk on stream-of-consciousness, expecting him to be in on the secret on the strength of his brief meeting with writer Wang Meng when visiting Beijing, as if stream-of-consciousness could be transmitted through contact. But he went anyway. So what if he was a peasant boy? From Kafka to Joyce Carol Oates, he gave them the whole wagonload. Just like those dinners at Western restaurants, he plied his knife and fork as well as anybody. The only regret was that, as he found out later, Cousin had come to visit while he was out babbling about stream-of-consciousness. Wife had managed to send her packing without her even seeing him and their son Baobao. She had left behind her rolls of pancakes, thin and smooth, made with her own hands. He could not forget how in those old days, when he set off for the county middle school, it was precisely Cousin's pancakes which sustained him over the dozens of miles of mountainous roads. All of it out of her own rations, virtually from her own bowl into his. And why had she done it? Of course, to help him leave the place.

Looking at the pancakes, he asked Wife, "Did you give Cousin money for her tickets?"

"She wouldn't take any."

"What about my family back home, any message?"

"Generous as we are already with our monthly remittances, how dare they open their mouths for more?"

When H. finally woke up to the new trend of writing about changes in the countryside, stories already were pouring off the presses, and he was alarmed. He read of peasants coming into town to pose for studio photographs, and of a peasant who had ingested so much rich food that he would run at the sight of fish and whose symptom had been diagnosed as the disease of "over-satiation."

"I must go back for a visit," H. told Wife. "Writing about Cousin, I have everything in my head. But when it comes to the new changes in the country, my mind is a complete blank."

"Oh, but Spring Festival is so close. . . ." Wife's words of course had a double meaning. Apart from her reluctance to spend the lunar new year without him, there was the vast expenditure that a family visit during that particular season was bound to incur. Especially a visit to a poor mountain village where the value of a work-point was a mere pittance. A host of poor relations would fix their eyes on his pockets. Above all, there was his own family's unending demands. And then there was Cousin. For such reasons, H. had never ventured back since the visit the year he'd wed. True, he had writers' fees, but his and Wife's salaries were modest, and what with all the socializing, his expenses were quite staggering. If only he were as rich as Hemingway. Yes, Wife's apprehensions were well-founded. So H. dropped the idea of a visit.

But H. still believes in himself, perhaps inspired by Cousin. If others can make up stories, so can he. "In a pinch," he thinks, "I can put in some stream-of-consciousness. A single fart can take up a thousand characters before you are through. My writing days are far from over." H. sets to work on a new story, in keeping with the vogue. Wife and Son immediately put on their earphones to watch TV so as not to disturb him.

Thus spurred by the competition, H. confronts the task of turning out a new story. His confidence has been bolstered by his readings in the new vogue. The crop of stories about changes in the countryside strike him as similar to those land reform stories of the 1950s. Well, history often repeats itself in remarkable ways, so why shouldn't literature do the same? Doesn't Hollywood rehash its old films for the box office? So H. decides to take a short cut. Of course, this is not something to let out in his talks about his work. All writers have their secrets.

From the stories of land reform he read as a child, he recalls images of rejoicing peasants. He remembers one scene of an old peasant holding his newly-granted land certificate in gnarled hands, tears flowing down his furrowed face. Now, with political standing in addition to economic gains, the peasant's whole mentality is transformed; his back, once bent, becomes straight and strong. Inspiration is just the matter of a flash.

The outline of the story takes shape. H. starts with an old peasant who barely survived the famines of the early sixties. Now, with the implementation of the new household responsibility system, he is handed a wad of banknotes after the fall reckoning of accounts. The fellow has never seen so much money in his life. He cannot believe it. Tears blind his eyes.

Not for nothing is H. the son of a peasant. Making up stories of peasants is but child's play. Still, describing an old peasant does not come as handily as describing Cousin. He had considered keeping Cousin as the protagonist, but quickly dropped the idea. Cousin is forever linked to poverty and hardship and unhappiness. He cannot envisage Cousin, or his home village for that matter, ever suffering from "over-satiation." Having a photo taken is no big deal. After all, it is thirty years since Liberation.

Yes, he must use the image of this old peasant crushing tobacco before rolling it for a smoke. Call him Old Geng. Names are a means to denote personal characteristics. Didn't Chekhov often do that? He had given Cousin her name, Han, Cousin Han, and it had stuck. Wife now calls her Cousin Han, and even their son Baobao, brought up in Cousin's lap, calls her Auntie Han. Finally, Cousin herself had accepted it. Such is the power of literature. No wonder people lay such stress on its functional aspects.

Another image emerges, the leader of a land reform work-team. Yes, he must juxtapose two historical periods, thus enhancing the ideological content of the story. H. can visualize his work-team leader standing on the patch of earth just allocated to Old Geng and telling him, "Go ahead, pour your sweat over this bit of land. Treat it well and it will treat you well. When you folks get to eating fine flour and rice all year long, let me know, and I'll come down for a dinner of stuffed dumplings." Later the work-team leader is promoted to head of the county agricultural department. Following that, during the years conveniently referred to as being brought on by "overheated brains," he won't go along with those ultra-leftist policies, so he's stripped of his position and sent down to the countryside for manual labor. In fact, he's sent to the very village where he supervised land reform. There, he eventually breathes his last breath. Initially, H. did not plan to kill off Peng—yes, the work-team leader's name should be Peng—but tragedy is decidedly more moving. So, with a rueful apology, he hauls Peng through a harrowing death scene, making him breathe his last gasps on a bitter cold winter day on the land where he had fought and which he loved.

Now H. is approaching the climax. Old Geng holds a bowl of stuffed dumplings in one hand and the wad of banknotes in the other as he visits Peng's gravesite. He wants to reassure the dead Peng: "Dear old Peng, the day that you promised has come. . . ." A suitable outpouring of words to

clutch at the hearts of his readers will follow. But a burst of laughter from Wife and Baobao behind him breaks his train of thought.

He turns to look at the TV screen. An old peasant, identical to *his* peasant, is furtively trying to hide a wad of banknotes. H. is dumbstruck. Baobao is laughing. H. puts down his pen in frustration. How is such a coincidence possible?

"What's up?" Wife asks.

H. sighs. For the last few years, situations like this one, what are called "head-on collisions," had become all too common. It seemed that writers, like birds of a feather, tended to fly in the same direction; that writers drove the wagons of their creative inspiration onto the same track, causing redundancy of plot and theme. Thus, sometimes H. would write something that somebody else had in mind, or somebody else would publish something that H. was in the process of writing. If the literary scene was like a raging sea, no wonder that flotsam thrown up by the tide gathered together in a heap.

Precisely at this moment of frustration comes a knock at the door. Who can it be at this late hour? It can't be editors asking for articles, or aspiring young writers seeking the keys to literary success. Wife goes to the door, and H. hears her forced welcome, "Oh. . . ." Before he can get up, Cousin is in the room, calling "Baobao!"

"Come sit down, Cousin Han, we're just watching a TV show about getting rich in the countryside." Wife will hold up appearances, that much should be allowed.

Cousin Han sits down, quite unaware of causing any disturbance. She says: "I don't know what came over me, I felt quite ill with longing for the sight of Baobao. So I got a ticket and came. Come, Baobao, give auntie a hug." H. is surprised at her flow of words; she never had much to say for herself before. "Spring Festival is not far off, the trains are so crowded. Oh, my poor pancakes and eggs, they're all crushed."

H. smiles. "Pancakes again, Cousin? You never come without them, do you?"

"These are made from millet flour," Cousin announces proudly. "Try them. It's been years since we've seen millet pancakes. Such a treat."

Wife smiles superciliously. But H. knows very well that millet flour pancakes are a notch higher on the culinary scale than cornflour pancakes; at least that's the case in their village up in the mountains. He remembers very

well the heavenly delight of millet flour pancakes spread with beaten eggs, yellow gold topping yellow gold, and add to that two strips of newly-plucked leek. The restaurant dish of sea cucumbers at that dinner in honor of a certain editor-in-chief was nothing in comparison.

Wife's smile disquiets H. He understands Cousin perfectly. Cousin might be a country clod, her clothes might be outlandish, but in essence she is second to none. She has a deep inner self, a whole wealth of feeling, hidden from the world by the deprivations of poverty. Luckily, Cousin's attention is focused on the comic peasant character on screen, so she doesn't notice Wife's smile. In the old days, during the two years when she stayed with them to look after Baobao, such a smile would have immediately crushed her. Everything would have shown on her face: her sense of inferiority, her loneliness in an alien setting, her mortification at being snubbed.

Now she sits composed, in the same old padded cotton coat and overalls that she always wore. Evidently Cousin is still mired in poverty. He must talk to Wife about giving her the money for her fare. If Wife is in a good mood, she might even agree to buy Cousin something to wear.

"Cousin Han, how are things in our village nowadays?" H. has just remembered his unfinished story.

"Better than before. . . ." What with Baobao on her lap and the TV before her, Cousin can't be bothered.

"Better? How, better?"

Of course, Cousin has no idea what the writer is looking for. On the contrary, she says, "It should have been like that right from the start."

He prods: "Oh, come on Cousin, can't you forget the past and tell me of something new happening in our village? Suppose you had all that cash yourself, what would you do with it?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you yourself," answers H., as if actually handing over the money.

Wife snorts. Surprisingly, the usually sensitive Cousin appears not to notice. Probably caught up by the TV. After a while, Cousin says, "If I had that much money, I'd buy a TV."

Like a flash of light across a murky sky, the tale is born, an extension of Old Geng's story. Old Geng should go and buy a TV—making him go sit for his photo is such a childish expediency. And Old Peng mustn't die. No, Peng must live. Even before the Center's directives have been relayed to the

grassroots, the far-sighted Peng already has initiated the responsibility system. And under what pressure! Clasping the faithful Old Geng by the hand, Peng sheds tears of sheer frustration as they sit together in the field, trying to work out details of the responsibility system.

"However," Cousin says, "what's the use of buying a TV! We can't tune in. Some have tried it. Nothing appears on the screen, except those dots and lines, like it's raining."

He's got it! Even the ending is there. H. can't contain himself for excitement. Was it Maupassant, or Flaubert, who said that once you have a good start and a good end, the work is half done. H. returns to his desk and spreads out his paper. Evidently, the writer's inspiration is like fried doughsticks, best when straight out of the frying pan, piping hot. He must lay out the general plan of his story while the heat of inspiration is high, and look after the details later. His pen flies feverishly over the paper. He is oblivious to Wife putting Baobao to bed, and then opening the folding bed in the foyer for Cousin to sleep on, and then holding one hand to her nose while with the other she puts away the trash, that is, the gifts Cousin brought from the countryside.

Only when Wife places herself in front of him, biting her lips and breathing heavily, does H. become aware of her presence. The Muses must give way to the Sphinx. H. puts down his pen and asks timidly, "What's up?"

"It seems she's here for a long stay. . . ."

"Shh. . . ." H.'s pen, as if impelled by magic, has just gotten to when Old Geng, all worked up with excitement over his new prosperity, rushes into the county town with the good news to look up Old Comrade Peng, now head of the Party committee. Geng is bent on dragging Peng home to a dinner of stuffed dumplings, that yet unfulfilled promise of thirty-two years ago.

H. won't repeat the detail of the fat wad of banknotes. Too infantile. No. Under his pen, Old Geng falls in love with Party Secretary Peng's TV set. Upon hearing the price, he pats his bulging pockets and makes straight for the shopping lane. But with Wife glaring at him, H. has to leave Old Geng at the doorstep of the electronics department and turn to negotiations. He nearly begs: "Since Cousin has arrived, let her stay a few days."

"But Spring Festival is close upon our heels!"

"So what? Surely we can spare a bowl of rice for Cousin!" How intolerant women are of other women. Actually, hasn't Cousin the right to stay over the New Year? H. is about to remind Wife: "Beside her support of me, have you forgotten who nursed you after your confinement? When your milk was dry, who fed Baobao day in and day out?" But he quails before Wife's thunderous looks.

Wife resumes, "Don't you see, during the New Year so many people will be in and out of the house: editors, writers, reporters, TV directors, actors. . . . What will they say when they see this countrywoman around the place?"

"So what if she is a countrywoman?" H.'s sensibilities as a peasant boy are stung.

"All right, tomorrow I'm taking Baobao home to my family." Every woman has her own special weapon. Some work, others don't. With H., this works. He is mortally afraid of this particular threat.

"Don't, please. . . ."

"As if I don't have a cousin of my own!"

"I beg you, don't shout." H. is in agony. He is sure Cousin is softly crying as she lies on the cot on the other side of the wall. These modern apartment buildings are not soundproof. Besides, Wife's remarks are made for her ears. In the past, whenever they quarrelled on her account when she was staying with them as Baobao's nursemaid, she invariably appeared the next morning with eyes swollen from weeping. Nothing can be done. It seems she was born to be trod upon. But isn't a peasant, even a poor peasant, entitled to some respect? At Wife's mention of her own "cousin," H. feels even more keenly the injustice to his. "Cousin" indeed! Some farfetched imaginary "cousinship" by who knows what thread of relationship, but Wife and all his in-laws cling to this flimsy thread as if their lives depended on it. And why? Just because she's rich, owns a restaurant in the U.S. Gives out that she's been to college. Never even heard of Faulkner, or Saul Bellow! College indeed! Whereas it was his cousin who first set him on the road to literature.

"What are you going to do about it anyway?" Wife demands.

Part of H.'s mind is still hovering over Old Geng, who has yet to buy his TV. The story is about to be wrapped up. For the sake of his work, he must compromise. Anyway, all their battles so far have always ended in his defeat. "All right, I'll tell her to leave before the New Year. Will that do?"

But how can he bring himself to utter the words? No matter what lies he makes up, Cousin's eyes will look at him quietly, seeing through him. But she will not protest, she will not bear a grudge, she will suffer in silence. Even if he tells her, "Go. Wife does not want you here. Because you are just a poor relation." She will submit just the same. She will not make it difficult for H. Hadn't Wife forced him to send her back as soon as Baobao was old enough to go to the nursery?

"But then," he has decided to wrest some concessions, "what about her ticket coming and going back?"

"Let her have it!"

"New Year is on. We can't let Cousin go back empty-handed. Some candies, some pastries for the family. . . ."

"Give it to them!"

"And also, buy Cousin something to wear. . . ." Although timid on this score, H. still musters up enough courage to raise the point.

"What!" Wife looks dangerous.

"Hasn't my latest check arrived?"

"But I need to buy Chinese medicine to mail to the U.S. Isn't my cousin also entitled to something for the New Year?" Wife thunders forth, nearly waking Baobao.

Just then, Cousin walks into the room. This country habit of walking into a room without knocking is anathema to Wife. This time, it's a shock to H. In the past, when the couple had their wrangles because of her, even if she heard the unjust accusations, she would stay quietly away, swallowing her tears. What is she doing now? H. stares at her.

"What's the matter with you two?" she asks in her usual quiet voice. She is calm and collected, standing above their petty squabble. Instead of the tears and frightened expression of the old days, she smiles coolly. "Didn't I say that I just wanted to have a look at Baobao? Last time I missed you both. When I went back, my heart was so empty. . . ."

H. suddenly remembers babbling about stream-of-consciousness and Freud and what not at the teachers' college the day poor Cousin spent six yuan on a railway ticket, all for nothing. How many eggs had she saved to put together six yuan! He'd been showing off on stage, and his son enjoying himself on the playground, while this poor woman who sincerely wished them happiness made a journey in vain.

"That last time, thanks to the new policy, I had some extra money from selling the pig. And this time, the autumn reckoning is just over. I made more than last year, so I made up my mind to come." H. turns and looks at Baobao with deep affection. No doubt even Wife remembers that bitter winter when Cousin carried Baobao to the hospital in the dark of night, not once, but many times. "There's a pile of work at home and at the brigade. I can't stay even if you asked me to. I'm going back tomorrow. See, I've already got my ticket. I wouldn't want to impose."

"Cousin Han, I didn't mean it that way. . . ." Wife starts to explain.

"That's alright." Cousin actually smiles. Used to her habitually wretched expression, H. is surprised. It seems that Cousin has found a new joy. She stoops and kisses the sleeping Baobao. This is something that Wife can't stand, but now she bears it.

Thus the family row is pacified. H. finishes off his story in a few words. Old Geng takes his newly acquired TV set back to the village. But to his chagrin, it won't work. No matter how he fiddles with it, nothing appears on the screen except rain, as Cousin said. Old Geng is furious. He curses the wretched thing, calls it a damn snob that only operates for townspeople, cheating poor countryfolk. He picks the thing up and dashes it to the ground. The county Party Secretary sees the wreck and says it's good money wasted. But Old Geng says: "Never mind. As long as the responsibility system lasts, I'll buy a bigger one after you've set up a transmission tower."

H. finishes and lets out a sigh of relief. The ending is rather pedantic, with its pointed reference to the responsibility system, but dashing the TV to the ground will be a hit, it brings out the character so vividly. That night, H. sleeps soundly, but is rudely wakened by a dream in which his old peasant Geng becomes a Brazilian soccer fan with a massive red beard and a cigar. When his favorite team loses to Uruguay, Old Geng throws his TV out of the window. H. sits up suddenly in bed, waking Wife. "What's up with you?" she asks.

After a few minutes, he calms down. "Yes, it's only those hot-blooded Latin Americans who act that way." H. suddenly thinks of Cousin in her old clothes. Frugal as she usually is, she must have cared very deeply to part with so much for the tickets. The peasants, dependent on the soil for a living, are the most down-to-earth people in the world. H. has lost confidence. "It's over with me," he cries, clutching his head in despair.

"How could I be so shallow? What new changes did I really see for myself?" In his heart of hearts, he even blames Cousin. Why couldn't she personify the radiance of the new era, so he might carve out the image of a shining new Cousin?

The next morning, Cousin leaves hurriedly. Wife presses upon her two ten-yuan notes, repetition of a familiar scene. Although Wife keeps repeating, "Please take it, please," her heart is not in it. After all, these two banknotes represent a considerable slice of their monthly salaries. As to Cousin, her emotions are even harder to fathom. But poverty, dire poverty, in the past obliged her to accept the begrudged charity. On this occasion, though, Cousin is firm in declining. She not only refuses, but conveys a message to H. "Your parents said to tell you, in the future keep your money for Baobao, they can get along without the remittances. Life is better than before."

"Cousin. . . ." H. presses the money into her hands.

Cousin smiles, pushes the money back and leaves.

This is the first time she is not in town as a beggar. Perhaps that is why she walks with such a light step. H. seems to catch onto something for the first time as he watches Cousin's retreating figure.

Translated by Zhu Hong, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993.