

SWEET POTATOES

By ARTHUR LEE

WHEN I was a little boy, my mother and I lived in a village in Cheong-hong Valley, in Hoi-ping. Three sides of the village were surrounded by bamboo evergreens thirty feet high, but those in front of the village were only five feet.

I had no idea of my father. Every time I asked Mother about him, she said that he had been far away across the sea in Canada ever since I was a baby. One day our next door neighbour had a new baby. Because of my curiosity I asked Mother where it had come from. She said they had picked it up in the field. But when I asked where she had got me, she laughed for a while and then said, "Your father and I made up your body, and God gave you a soul. That's how you came into the world."

As the years went by, I found that I disliked many tasks. I found Mother often opposed my actions and desires. While I was helping her in the fields, she would say in reply to my complaints, "Your labour will be rewarded, son," but I was not re-assured. I often insisted that we should grow more sweet potatoes and fewer cabbages and such like. Mother disagreed and said I did not know enough yet. Whenever I was put off with that, I became angry, went home from the field, leaving Mother alone to carry on with the back-breaking work.

One afternoon I was alone in the house. The clock caught my attention. Mother had often told me that it was the clock that kept us doing our work on time. Now I began to wonder how and why the clock could possibly work. I grasped it and wound it, after closing my book. Alas, I broke the spring! I was frightened by the strange sound of the clock. I feared what Mother would say when she came back, tired out, from the field. So I took the clock apart to repair the spring—but how could I know where each and every little wheel went! And now Mother came back. At the sight of the clock she slapped me and said I would be driven out if I didn't stop my silliness. I couldn't tell her of my curiosity. Then after a moment she held me close and said, "That clock cost us a lot of money during the war. And now we have it no more!" Tears were running from her eyes.

All this destroyed my self-confidence and made me feel unwanted. I would leave home! Two weeks later I told Mother that I was going. At the thought she almost fainted,

but at last she said, "You, too, are going to leave me, eh?" She was crying.

"But, Mom, I don't like country life any more."

There was a long silence. She was looking out of the window. Finally she turned, having made the great decision. "Yes, I should not stop you. Go, dear. Go and see the world. But remember, a mother always loves her child."

Her words almost broke my resolution, but Mother continued: "Where to, then?"

Yes, where? I had never thought of that. I knew only three families, all related to us, in different towns. I named the nearest one, about fifty miles away, where Mother and Uncle Yeu had been brought up.

A sudden smile lit her face. "And when will you go?"

"To-morrow."

"So soon?"

"Yes."

"Do you need any help from your mother, such as money?" Her eyes were fixed on me.

"I have some—the money you gave me every week."

Taking something from the drawer, she drew me to her and put it into my hand. Then she kissed me on the forehead. It was a twenty-dollar bill! Now I was laughing at Mother: she thought I was going to visit Uncle Yeu, but my intention was three times as far away.

The next morning Mother accompanied me to the bus stop. Now the bus was coming. "Always take care of yourself." I nodded. She was weeping. After kissing me, she pushed me to go. While I was standing on the step I looked back. I heard her shout, "Go, dear, and have courage to travel far." I saw a smile, full of good wishes, come over her face. It was the most unforgettable smile in my life. The bus started to move. I saw Mother through the window. All alone, she was bravely waving to me. How sad it was as the wind blew her hair! The bus turned a corner. I could no longer see my mother or the lovely country. Regret came over me. I tried to stifle my tears.

My aunt's family showed surprise at my coming alone in an unhappy mood. Of course I said that Mother had agreed to my coming. Still I was ashamed that I had deceived her about my destination—so far from home. I began to miss her. The next day the family were all kind to me, just as they had been when Mother and I had visited them two years before. Whenever my cousins had time they took me round the town. Gradually I began to forget Mother.

One day, while my cousins and I were walking in the street, I saw a boy playing with water there. His mother rushed out. "You will catch cold, dear; so let's go home and change your clothes." With a rush memories of my dear mother came crowding upon me.

I had been away from Mother for two months now. One evening my cousins asked me many questions about country life.

"Cousin, what did you do in the country?"

"Oh, lots! After school I planted flowers and helped Mother in the field. I went fishing with my friends, or just read a book under the big tree." I tried to recall as much of the past as I could.

"Oh, it must be very interesting."

"Certainly it is."

"What would you like to grow in the field if you were a real farmer?"

"Sweet potatoes, of course! So big, so sweet! But it is very funny Mother doesn't agree with me."

"Why should Aunt?" my eldest cousin retorted.

"You like sweet potatoes, don't you? Or do you think I am wrong?" I returned coolly.

"Of course I like them, but Aunt is not wrong either. Besides, she knows more than you do." But she was smiling.

I recalled what mother used to say: "Everybody has to learn and work. While you learn, you should always learn the best."

That night I couldn't sleep until very late. The next day while I was sitting alone in the room, my eldest cousin took my hand. "Let's go for a walk. We went out. I said nothing when we were walking on the grass, but at last she began.

"What are you thinking of now?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, yes, you are. Mother and sweet potatoes." She laughed.

"Yes. Mother. She needs me, and . . . and I need her."

"You are planning to go home, then?"

"Yes. . . But I will be ashamed of myself because I lied to Mother."

"Aunt will forgive you. It is very interesting to live in the country. I think I will go with you to see Auntie. And besides, I will help you raise more sweet potatoes."

"Do come with me, Rose!"

She smiled.

My aunt was very pleased when I mentioned my plan of

going home the following week. "Your mother is waiting for you every day. She needs you. Here is her letter, which I received two weeks ago. She told me to give it to you whenever you decided to go home."

I seized it and read it.

My dear Son,

You must have been away for some time. You and your father have made me lose my heart twice. Now you can imagine how lonesome your mother is and how she misses you.

Undoubtedly you are growing up now, and you will gradually want to be independent. I always think I should not discourage you in any way. It is only because of love that a Mother doesn't like to see her children leave her. .

I have always tried to help you satisfy your curiosity and wishes, but sometimes, dear, things are not so easy as we should like. You are still young. Some of your ideas were absurd. Of course, I may sometimes have been wrong, but I have never meant to oppose what you really want to do. I have only tried to help you to fit into the world and to be a good man in the future. I will always love you. That is what a mother is.

I have learned that you lied to me. Remember, dear, don't lie to any one, because lies will do harm to yourself and to others. Think correctly to help yourself. I will forgive you whenever you come back.

Love,

Mother.

Tears were rushing down my cheeks. Rose helped me dry them, as Mother had often done.

A week later, as Rose and I stepped off the bus, I found Mother waiting there with the same smile that I could remember. She took our hands. While walking to the village, Mother asked me, "Tell me, dear, what have you learned while you've been away?"

"I've learned to know what a mother means to me when I don't have her round."

She smiled. "Your father may come back soon to us."

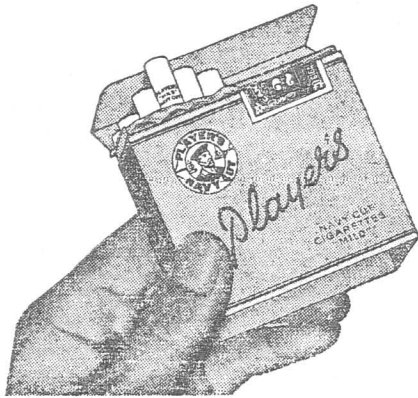
I looked into her face. How happy she was!

Then she looked at Rose, but said to me, "I bet Rose has come to help you raise more sweet potatoes, eh?"

"Yes."

While Rose's eyes met mine, Mother smiled.

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