A TOUCH OF GREEN

p. 1-34
A TOUCH OF GREEN
by
Pai Hsien-yung

TRANSLATED BY PATIA ISAKU AND THE AUTHOR
PART ONE

It was that year, the year we won the Anti-Japanese War and moved back to the old capital Nanking; we lived in one of the housing complexes for the dependents of middle- and lower-rank Air Force men, East Benevolence Village on Universal Way Alley. After going through all that misery for so many years in the hinterlands in an out-of-the-way spot like Szechwan, before we knew it there we were, back in the Capital of the Six Dynasties. That was triumphant, wasn't it? At that time Wei-ch'eng was serving as head of the Eleventh Group. Two of the squadrons under him had just come back from training in America, so the pilots in his Group were rather highly thought of, and they were given very heavy responsibilities. Whenever there was an urgent mission to fly he'd take the boys out himself. Sometimes, in a three or four days out of the week, I didn't even get to see so much as the back of his head. Every time he went out on a mission he'd take Kuo Chen along. This was his favorite student; even when Kuo Chen
was a cadet at the Airforce academy in Kuanhsien, in Szechwan. Wei-ch'eng used to say to me, "That kid is smart as a whip!"
For sure he's got a great future ahead of him." Sure enough, Kuo Chen outdid everybody, in just a few short years he worked himself up to head of a squadron and went off to America for training.

Kuo Chen was an orphan, his father was a Airforce man, too, a schoolmate of Wei-ch'eng's; he'd got killed in a plane crash when Kuo Chen was very small, his mother had fallen ill and passed away soon after. While he was at the academy, whenever New Year's and the other festivals rolled around I'd invite him over to our home for family dinner. Wei-ch'eng and I had nor chick nor child, we saw Kuo Chen was all by his lonesome so we just took him under our wing. He had his head shaved green and shiny then, wore that mud-yellow cotton Airforce cadet uniform; he was such a bright boy, you could tell from every little thing, even the way he carried himself. But he was still shy with words, he was still a kid after all, and his mother had been a surprise the day when he got back from America and came rushing over to our home in Nanking and gave me a salute and called me "School Mother." I was stunned! I simply couldn't believe my eyes. He was equipped head to foot in an American-style gabardine Airforce uniform.

* Literally, teacher mother, a term of affection and esteem used by students to address the wife of their teacher. The commonly used term for teacher is lao-shih (old or venerable teacher).
a leather jacket with a turn-down fur collar, belt buckled tight with his Ray-Ban goggles-case fastened to it. He wore his high-peaked service cap with the brim pulled down to just above his eyebrows; his hair had grown out, black and shiny, brushed back neatly over his ears. Only a couple of years ago Who would have expected Kuo Chen to turn out to be such a dashing young fellow?

"Well, well, young man!" I said to him with a laugh. "You must have brought back some good news this time, huh?"

"Oh, nothing special, School Mother; I just saved up a few hundred U. S. dollars, that's all."

"Aha! Enough to get yourself an old woman now!" I chuckled.

"That's right, School Mother!" He grinned. "As a matter of fact, I'm looking around right now."

Our young pilots practically stole the whole show in postwar Nanking. No matter where you went in the highways and byways, you were bound to run into some cocky young pilot parading around with a fashionably-dressed young doll on his arm. Romance was in the air—who was single talked about falling in love, every single pilot was ready for romance. Every month we'd be sure to get wedding invitations from some of Wei-ch'eng's students. But it was more than a year
since Kuo Chen was back from America, and I hadn't gotten the good word from him yet. On he'd brought some stylish young ladies over for my hot-beanpaste carp, all right. Afterwards, though, when I asked him what was what he'd just shake his head with a smile.

"Nothing of the kind, School Mother; I'm just having fun."

Then, one day, he came running in and told me:

This time it's serious. He'd fallen in love with a student at the Chinling Middle School for Girls; her name was Verdancy Chu.

"School Mother," he told me, full of excitement, "I know you'll like her! I want to bring her over to meet you. School Mother, I never dreamed I could get so serious about a girl!"

By this time I must say I understood Kuo Chen pretty well. He was a very proud boy; he'd made his mark early, so naturally he was a bit swell-headed. Whenever we'd had a chat about it he'd told me he would never marry unless he found a girl who met his standards thoroughly. The young ladies he'd brought over before were extraordinarily pretty, every one of them, but none of them satisfied him.

I thought to myself, This girl Verdancy must be some kind of goddess flown down from Heaven for Kuo Chen to be so smitten.
When I really did meet Verdancy, she was a total surprise to me. That day Kuo Chen brought her to our house for lunch. Turned out she was a rather thin, frail young maiden, eighteen or nineteen years old, even though she'd come for a visit she was just wearing a plain blue cotton frock, rather old, with an ordinary white silk handkerchief sticking out of the flap near her collar. She didn't have a permanent yet; her hair was combed back tidily behind her ears. She was in black leather Mary Janes, a pair of white cotton ankle-socks, spotless. I gave her a good look: her body wasn't in full bloom yet; she seemed a bit flat-chested. She looked a little pale. But her eyes, and something she kept, limpid, graceful, made you feel so purified. When she saw me her head was half-lowered all the time, so bashful with a timid air about her that really melted your heart. All during lunch no matter how hard I tried to get her to talk, all she did was mumble a word or two in reply.

"You see? Look how disagreeable she can be!" Finally Kuo Chen lost patience and pointed at Verdancy. "At least she's got something to talk about when she's with me, but
the minute she sees people she clams up. She's got her tongue in her mouth, and still she acts like a "fraidy cat!"

Kuo Chen was a little too nasty, really! Verdancy turned away, her face red with embarrassment.

"That's enough, now." I felt pretty sorry for the girl and stopped Kuo Chen. "This is Miss Chu's first visit; of course she's a little shy. Now you're not to pick on her anymore. After lunch you two better go see Lake Huawanwu. The lotus flowers there are just blooming. It's gorgeous!"

"All right,"

Kuo Chen had come on his flashy new motorcycle. When they left after lunch he put Verdancy on the pillion and helped her tie her black silk scarf around her hair; then he leaped into the saddle and started to rev up; he gave me a jaunty wave and was off in a flash, carrying Verdancy with him. She snuggled up against Kuo Chen's back, her scarf flapping high in the wind. Well, that clinched it, from the way he treated her I knew he was serious this time.

Once Wei-ch'eng came back looking fit to be tied, the minute he walked in the door he started to fume. "Kuo Chen, that miserable kid! now he's gone way too far! I didn't expect him to turn out like this!"
"Now, now, what's the matter?" I was astonished; why! I'd never heard Wei-ch'eng say so much as an unpleasant word about Kuo Chen before.

"You're asking me! Didn't you know he's been running around with a Chinling-schoolgirl? The way I look at it, he must have lost his head over her! He kept breaking into her school all the time and trying to get her out, didn't matter whether she was in class or not. And if that wasn't bad enough, when he was up on a training flight, guess what that nut did: he flew over Chinling and kept circling the school building! All the schoolgirls got all excited and stuck their heads out of their classroom windows to see what was going on. The principal himself reported it to our Headquarters — now I ask you, what kind of idiotic behavior is this? A pilot to carry on like a lunatic, so help me I'm going to throw the book at him!"

Kuo Chen got a letter of reprimand in his record and was demoted from squadron leader. When I saw him, he tried to explain to me. "School Mother, it's not as if I was planning to bend regulations and get Teacher mad at me. It's Verdancy, she's stolen my heart away. Honest to God, School Mother, when I was flying up there
in the sky, my heart was down here on the ground, following her. Verdancy's such a sweet kid, maybe a little bit shy, and doesn't know how to mingle. Now she got expelled from school; her folks have wired her from Chungking to come straight back home. She'd rather die than go back! She got into a fight with her parents and broke off with them. She says she'll follow me to the ends of the earth, no matter what, for the rest of her life! and now she's staying all by herself in a little hotel and she doesn't know what to do next."

"Oh, you idiot," I sighed, shaking my head. I had no idea even a smart person would get so foolish when they fell in love. "Since you two are so mad about each other why don't you just go and get married?"

"School Mother, that's just what I've come to talk to you about, and ask you and Teacher to preside at the wedding." Kuo Chen beamed.

After Kuo Chen and Verdancy got married they moved into our East Benevolence Village too. Kuo Chen had two weeks' leave to get married; originally he and Verdancy had planned to go to Hangchow on their honeymoon, but just before they left the Civil War broke out. Wei-ch'eng and his group were ordered to Manchuria. The morning
they took off, in the early dawn, Kuo Chen stole into 
my kitchen? I was just making a fire to cook Wei-ch'eng 
his porridge. Kuo Chen, his jacket over his shoulders, 
his hair all mussed, eyes bloodshot, unshaven, grabbed 
my hand.

"School Mother," he said hoarsely, "This time, to take care of
no matter what, I've got to rely on you, Ma'am——"

"I get you," I interrupted him. "While you're 
gone, of course I'm the one who's going to take care of
that little wife of yours."

"School Mother——" Kuo Chen was still worrying.

"Verdancy's still too young; there's a lot she still
doesn't understand about the way we do things in the
Air Force. You've just got to treat her like one of the
family, try to get her to learn how to cope."

"All right, all right," I laughed. "Your Mamma's already been following your Teacher around for
all these a dozen years, or more, in the Air Force; you tell me what
I haven't seen? I don't know how many people have gotten
tips from me. Verdancy's certainly no fool; just you
wait, I'll see that she gets adjusted——all in good time."

After Wei-ch'eng and Kuo Chen and some of the other
boys left, I got my housework done and went over to see
Verdancy. The place they got from the Government was a neat little wooden house. Before they moved in, Kuo Chen had gotten the place all painted, all new drapes, quite an attractive place. When I walked in, I saw they still had the wedding decorations up in the living room. The table and chairs were piled high with the wedding presents, all in their red and green wrappings; they hadn't even opened some of them yet. The table was surrounded by baskets of flowers; the roses and the gladioli were still fresh; even the phoenix-tail ferns had stayed green. The wedding scrolls hadn't been taken down from the wall yet; on the central living room wall hung a wedding plaque presented by Kuo Chen's schoolmates, an affair with gold inlaid characters:

TOGETHER INTO WHITEHAIRED OLD AGE

Verdancy was in her room; she hadn't even heard me when I came in. She was lying on her side, her face buried in the quilt, sobbing. She was still in her bright-colored silk bridal gown, her new permanent all mussed up, her hair-ends were all sticking out like twigs. She'd rumpled up the silk quilt-cover, embroidered with pairs of mandarin ducks embroidered in all the colors of the rainbow; on the quilt-cover near her face was a tear stain as big as a bowl. When she heard me come in, she started and sat up; the only words she got out were 'School Mother,' and then all she could do was sob. Her face was peagreen, eyes swollen,
she looked more fragile than ever. I went over to smooth her hair for her, then I went and wrung out a hot towel and handed it to her. Verdancy took the hot towel, covered her face, and broke down again. Outside the house the military trucks and jeeps were hauling the men's baggage, the ear-piercing clanging of their iron rods and chains went on and on. The men in the Village were still going off to the war; the women were screaming, the children were crying, there was a whole commotion going on. I waited until Verdancy had cried herself out, then I patted her on the shoulder.

"Well, it's your first time, and they did leave so suddenly; it's always like this—don't cook tonight and come and have dinner with me. Keep me company."

* * * *

Once Wei-ch'eng and Kuo Chen were gone, we didn't have the vaguest notion where they were. One minute we heard they were sent to North China, the next minute they wrote us they'd flown to Central China; for several months they didn't come home once. During this time Verdancy was with me constantly. Sometimes I taught her cooking, sometimes I taught her knitting, and sometimes I taught her how to play a little mahjong.
"Now this little gismo is a real cure-all," I told her, laughingly. "Whenever you've got something on your mind, just sit down at the table and Red Dragon, White Dragon, before you know it, all your worries will be forgotten."

After she got married Verdancy had become much more outgoing, but she was still a little shy of strangers, except for my place she didn't go to visit any other families in the Village. I knew practically everybody there, all about them, so by and by I picked some of their histories to tell Verdancy so she'd become familiar with the kind of life we lived.

"Don't sell these people short," I told her. "They've all been through a hell of a lot, let me tell you. Take Mrs. Chou, for example, the lady who lives behind you, she's been married four times. Her present husband and the three before him were all in the same squadron. One died and the next took over, one by one, in turn. Her husbands were all good friends to begin with, so they were all very nice to her, mind you. And Mrs. Hsu across the street from you, her husband used to be her younger brother-in-law. The Hsu brothers were both in the Thirteenth Group. The older brother got killed, and the younger brother took his place. To her first husband's kids he's Uncle,
and at the same time he's Papa; for a long time they just
didn't know what to call him."

"But how can they still talk and laugh like that?"
Verdancy looked at me in bewilderment.

"My dear girl!" I laughed. "If they don't laugh,
what do you want them to do, cry? If they wanted to cry,
believe me they wouldn't have waited till now."

Ever since Kuo Chen left, Verdancy didn't want
to go far from the Village; she just stayed close to home
and waited. Sometimes a whole bunch of us went off to
the Confucius Temple District to listen to the singsong
girls; even then, Verdancy wouldn't join us. She said
she was afraid of missing a telephone call from Head-
quartes about Kuo Chen. One day, a message came from
Headquarters: Wei-ch'eng's group was stopping over in
Shanghai for a day or so; they might get a chance to
make a quick sidetrip to Nanking. Bright and early,
Verdancy dashed in and dashed out and came back with two
basketfuls of groceries. In the afternoon I passed by
her door and saw her in a blue cotton worksuit, an old
kerchief around her hair, standing on a stool washing
the windows. She was so small that even on tiptoe she
couldn't reach the window-tops; she was holding a big
washrag and swinging left and right across the window-pane, with might and main.

"Verdancy!" I called out, "Kuo Chen isn't going to inspect for dust all the way up there!"

Verdancy looked round and saw me; her face turned crimson. "I don't know what's happened," she mumbled.

"It's only a few months and the house is already in bad shape. I just can't get it clean."

In the evening, Verdancy came by to invite me to go with her to the Village gatehouse where the military telephone was, to wait for the phone call. Headquarters had promised to call us around six or seven. Verdancy had washed and changed; she'd put on an apricot-colored frock of light silk, and she wore a silk apple-green ribbon in her hair; she even had a little lipstick on, looking very fresh and lovely. At first she was very gay, talking and laughing with me; when it got a little past six she became tense, her face taut; her voice grew hushed; and she was knitting as she kept looking up at the telephone on the table. We waited and waited until past nine o'clock, the telephone rang. Verdancy leaped up and rushed to the phone; the balls of wool in her lap fell to the floor and rolled all around, but when she got
to the table she turned to me. "School Mother — " her voice trembling, "it's the phone."

I went over to answer the phone; the people at Headquarters said Wei-ch'eng and his group had only stopped two hours in Shanghai; they flew on to Northern Kiangsu at five in the afternoon. When I relayed the news to Verdancy, she went pale; she stood there in silence for a moment, her face twitching, as she tried not to cry.

"Let's go home," I said to her.

We went back into the Village, Verdancy walking behind me quietly. When we reached my door I said, "Don't feel bad; in their business you never know what's going to happen next."

Verdancy turned her head away and touched her sleeve to her eyes. "I'm not complaining, really," her voice shook, "it's only, waiting all day, in vain — "

I put my arm around her shoulders and hugged her. "Verdancy, honey, School Mom's got something to tell you; I hope you'll listen. It is not easy to be a Flying Warrior's wife, you know. Twenty-four long hours a day your heart is trailing up there in the air after him. You keep looking at the sky, looking and looking until your eyes shed blood; the ones up there may not even know."
They're just like those iron birds; one minute they fly to the east, the next minute they fly to the west, you just can't catch them. Since you're married into our Village, Verdancy, honey, don't blame me if I speak frankly to you: you've just got to steel yourself and harden your heart in order to bear all the turbulence and storms to come."

Verdancy stared at me through her tears, nodding her head, half understanding.

"You go home now." I lifted her chin and smiled at her with a sigh. "Go to bed early tonight."

* * * * *

In the winter of the thirty-seventh year of the Republic, our side began to lose ground everywhere in the Civil War; as the battles in the North grew more ominous, quite a few families in our Village got the bad news. Some of the wives ran off to the temples all the time to plead with the gods and pester the Bodhisatvas; those who went to fortune-tellers went and got their fortunes told; those who went to bone-feelers went and got their bones felt. I've never believed in all that mumbo-jumbo myself. Whenever Wei-ch'eng's letters were not arriving I'd invite my neighbors in for a game of mahjong to stew through the night and calm myself down.
One night, when I was in the middle of a game, that Mrs. Hsu, who lived across the way from Verdancy came rushing in and pulled me right out of there; in between gasps she told me Headquarters had just sent word, something terrible had happened to Kuo Chen; in Hsüchou he and his plane were dashed to pieces. When I rushed to Verdancy's house was packed with people. Verdancy was slumped backward on a chair; on either side of her arms had grabbed her arms trying to hold her down; a white towel was tied around her head; on the towel was a dark red bloodstain as big as your hand. As soon as I came in everybody inside started talking at once; the moment Verdancy got the notice she ran to the edge of the Village, Kuo Chen's uniform in her arms, howling as she ran; she kept insisting she was going out to search for Kuo Chen. Whenever people stopped her she started kicking and hitting out like crazy; the instant she was outside the Village entrance she dashed her head against an iron telephone pole and drove a big hole into her forehead; when she was carried back, she couldn't even utter a sound any more.

I went over to Verdancy, took a bowl of hot ginger broth from somebody and forced a brass spoon between her teeth; I got a couple of spoonfuls down her throat.
Her face was like a gashed-open fish's belly, red spot, white spot, blood and sweat all over. Her eyes stared wide open, unseeing. She didn't cry, but her blue lips kept opening and shutting, a shrill, small noise kept coming from her throat, as if somebody had stepped on a blind mole and it was letting out a dying shriek. It wasn't until I had force-fed her the whole bowl of broth that her eyes regained their sight, and gradually, she came to herself.

Verdancy was ill in bed a long time. I moved her to my house and watched over her day and night; there were even times when I was playing mahjong I put her where I could keep an eye on her. I was afraid if I let her out of my sight she'd try to cut it all short again. She lay in bed all day, wouldn't talk, wouldn't eat anything. Every day I had to force her to swallow some soup or something. In a few weeks, she was just skin and bones, her face ashen, her eyes sunk into two big holes. One day after I finished feeding her I sat on her bedside.

"Verdancy, dear, you mustn't waste yourself away like this and think you're doing it for Kuo Chen. If Kuo Chen is there and knows about it, he won't be able to rest in peace."
Verdancy listened to me; all of a sudden she sat up, shaking; she nodded at me and laughed coldly.

"What does he know? He fell, his body is dust, his bones are in pieces; how can he feel now? So much the better for him: bang and he's no more I died, too, but I can still feel."

As she spoke, her face was distorted, like crying, like laughing, horrible sight.

After watching over Verdancy for a month or so I almost broke down myself. Fortunately, just in time her folks came from Chungking. When her old man saw her he didn't say a word, but her mother spat, "Serves her right! Serves her right! I never wanted her to marry an airman, she wouldn't listen to me, now see what a mess she's in!"

They just plucked Verdancy right out of the bed as she was, hair all tangled, face unwashed, called a cart and hauled her off, bedding and all. Only a few days after Verdancy was gone, we, too, started to flee the

PART TWO

Ever since we came to Taipei years ago I've been living on Evergreen Road, by sheer coincidence our "dependents" housing complex is also called East Benevolence
Village, but there's no connection whatsoever with the one we lived in in Nanking; we've got people living here who've migrated from all over China; as for the people I knew in Nanking, I have no idea where they've ended up. Fortunately, in these years, the times have been peaceful. Life has been so easy; besides, our Airforce Recreational Activities are go on all the time, and they're just as good as the ones in the Nanking days. Today a Peking opera, tomorrow a dance show; every time something fresh comes along I like to go out to an evening show and have fun.

One year, on New Year's Day, the Airforce New Life Club put on a carnival. People said it was the grandest in years. Somebody sent me two tickets, so I took along the Li girl, my neighbor's middle-school-age daughter. When we arrived at the New Life Club the carnival had already been going on for quite a while. There was a whole crowd of people grabbing for tickets around the raffle; in the New Life Hall the band had already struck up the dance. The whole place was so jam-packed you could hardly move an inch: men, women, young people; mostly everybody laughing it up—mercy! what a racket! In the main hall the balloons, red and green, drifted overhead; some young Airforcemen in blue uniforms were popping them
with their cigarette butts, and the women jumped at the
crace and shrieked. Let me tell you, being whirled around
by a mob of screaming howling youngsters is enough to make
your head spin! I took the Li girl and fled into the New
Life Hall; we rested ourselves against a pillar and watched
the people dancing. That night they had a big band from
the Air Force, over twenty members. Quite a few singers,
too, coming on one after the other, all snazzily dressed;
they'd sing a hit song or two, come down on the floor and
start tripping the light fantastic with their buddies.

Just as the band was at its hottest, a particularly striking woman
dressed in a seductively-dressed woman came up. The moment she ap-
ppeared on stage the audience gave a roar of applause,
that here we had someone extra special.

obviously this had to be the hottest number. She stood
on stage smiling radiantly, without the slightest trace
of shyness, and coolly adjusted the microphone she nodded
to the bandleader and began to sing.

"Granny Ch'in, what's the name of this song?" asked
the Li girl, compared to me, she doesn't know the first
thing about pop songs. I leave my radio on all the time,
from morning till bedtime. I am ready for bed.

"'A Touch of Green,'" I answered.

"Of course I knew that song! I know it very well;
as a matter of fact, I hear White Light's recording of it

Radiance Park

Blaze, Radiance.

Can we think of a name
to suggest that this is a
person, not some recording
label?"
on the radio all the time. Well, that woman wasn't bad at all, actually; she quite a bit of White Light's moncholant, alluring air herself. Mike in one hand, her other hand toying with her enormous Beehive in a devil-insouciance, the thrust forward her chin and intoned way-care gesture, chin in the air, the words distinctly she sang:

On East Hill, a touch of green.
On West Hill, a touch of green.
If you've got the fancy,
your fancy is mine,
Darling! we two would make
a pair so fine ——

As she leaned back, swaying this way, swaying that way, suddenly the lines burst from her, as if they came from the bottom of her heart:

Aïva, aï-aïva,
Darling! we two would make
a pair so fine ——

While the band took over the song, she put down the mikes, went up to one of the musicians, got hold of the maracas, and chi-chi-cha-cha! she was off into a rumba shake, and wog in a manner I would say quite daring on the stage; a shimmy here, a shake there, she did her number with a flare. 
She was dressed in a purple see-through gauze cheongsam sprinkled with gold sequins, one wiggle and all the gold sequins flashed. When she finished her song there was no end to the applause. After she came down off the stage to be snatched away at once by a group of young pilots. I wanted to hear more of the singing, but the Li girl kept trying to pull me off to the raffle. As we were pushing our way through the crowd, somebody caught hold of my arm from behind and called, "School Mother!"

I turned around; I was amazed to see it was the woman who sang "A Touch of Green". Ever since I came to Taipei, nobody calls me "School Mother" any more; over here everybody calls me Granny Ch'in. It was so long since I'd heard anybody call me that; it was so unexpected that for a second it just didn't register.

"School Mom, it's me, Verdancy Chu," said the woman, all smiles.

I kept staring up and down at her; before I could say anything a bunch of young pilots came charging up and started howling and yowling for her to go dance with them. She shoed them away and whispered in my ear, "Why don't you give me your address, School Mom;"
In a day or two I'll invite you to my place for a game of mahjong. I'm really good at the game now; I've had a lot of practice, you know."

Before she turned to leave, she smiled at me and said in a low voice, "School Mom, it took me a good long time to recognize you, too, a while ago." When I first went to see the Peking opera "Wu Tzu-hsû Escapes through the Chao Pass," in which General Wu's hair turns all white overnight from anxiety, I used to think that kind of thing just happens in the theater; in real life, how could people's looks change so dramatically?

That night, I went home and as I was washing my face I took a good look in the mirror; I was startled to see my own hair covered with frost, too. No wonder Verdancy Chu did not recognize me any more. When we were fleeing the Civil War, our only concern was to save our lives; anything else was just small beer. The days and nights could turn themselves upside down for all we cared.

When we retreated to Hainan Island Wei-ch'eng fell ill and died. What a laugh, he flew all around the sky all his life and nothing happened to him, and there we were, sitting in a ship, and he died in such a shitty way. He got dysentery; there were too many sick people on board
and not enough medicine. I watched him letting loose all that muck until his face turned black. The minute he stopped breathing the sailors wrapped him up in a sandbag and dumped him into the ocean along with a few others. All I heard was a splash, and he was gone. From the day I married Wei-ch'eng I knew I'd have to plan how I was going to collect his body someday. I knew from the start that people like Wei-ch'eng wouldn't outlive me. I didn't expect that in the end I wasn't even able to claim his remains. Ever since we came to Taiwan I've been so busy living that memories of things that happened on the Mainland gradually faded away. To tell you the truth, if I hadn't run into Verdancy Chu at the New Life Club I'm not sure I'd ever have thought about her again.

Two or three days later Verdancy Chu did send a taxicab with a note to bring me over to have dinner. She lives in another Airforce dependents' complex on the fourth section of Justice Road. There were some other guests that night, three young pilots, probably in Taipei on weekend leave from Peachgarden Airforce Base; they all took a leaf out of Verdancy Chu's book and called me "School Mother."

"This is Smart-Cookie Liu," Verdancy Chu pointed
pasty-faced

at a short, fellow, puffed out like a loaf of bread.

"School Mom, just wait until you see him playing mahjong

later, the way he blows himself up! Then you'll know what

I mean."

Liu sidled up to Verdancy Chu. "Big Sister!" he

protested with a leer. "Don't tell me I got on your

wrong side again today? Not one kind word to date."

With her enticing chuckle Verdancy Chu passed him.

"This one runs an outfit for kids, let me tell you."

She pointed to another fellow who was dark and skinny.

"School Mom, you might as well call him Wang the Baby-doctor. He

always goes for the kid stuff. In all the time he's played

mahjong with us, why he hasn't shown a single respectable

hand once. He's our King of the Chicken Game."

Wang laughed out of the corner of his mouth. "Don't

you go too far, Big Sister! When we get down to the table,

Liu and I, we'll flank left and right and get you sand-

wiched in between. Then we'll really see how tough you

can be!"

"Oh, yeah?" Chin up, Verdancy Chu sneered. "Bring,

you two jokers. You can bring on two of your real

tough cookies for reinforcements, let alone

two precious articles like you. I'll take the whole lot

of you out to the cleaners, none of you jokers is leaving

this place till you hock your pants!"
Verdancy Chu was costumed in a sack, her arms bare, a red sweater around her shoulders. The sleeves dangling up and down as she walked. Her body had filled out, too! Even her complexion had grown fine and delicate; her face was fashionably painted; her eyes, once bright and limpid, now coquettish this way and that, sending out amorous glances. Then she introduced me to a young man in his twenties, Little Ku. He was much nicer-looking than the other two, strongly-built, thick eyebrows and a high nose; he seemed to be a lot more solid a fellow, not such a wiseguy. He followed Verdancy Chu around as she took care of the guests, helped her move chairs and tables, taking orders from her, doing all the heavy work.

In a little while we all sat down at the dinner-table; Verdancy Chu came in bearing the first course, steamed chicken, a steaming-hot, big, fat hen, in a large amber-colored porcelain bowl; the minute she laid the bowl down Smart Cookie jumped to his feet and went around behind Little Ku.

"Little Ku!" he pushed him and yelled. "You'd better eat a lot of this stuff, and fast! Big Sister steamed this chicken to make you big and strong!"
He and Wang let out a squeal. Little Ku laughed, too, but he looked rather embarrassed. Verdancy Chu snatched a garrison cap from the teatable and hit Smart Cookie Liu over the head with it; Liu covered his head with his arms and fled around the table. Wang picked up a spoon and ladled a helping of chicken broth into his mouth.

"Wow, it sure makes a whole lot of difference when Little Ku's around!" He smacked his lips and sighed. "Even Big Sister's chicken broth tastes sweet as honey!"

Verdancy Chu tossed the garrison cap away and doubled over with laughter. "These two gallows-birds!" she swore between her teeth, she shook her finger at Liu and Wang. "First you cop my chicken broth and then you have the nerve to ask me for honey!"

"Who else is Big Sister's honey for but us?"

Liu and Wang broke out laughing at the same time.

"If School Mom weren't here today, I'd say something you wouldn't like to hear!" Verdancy Chu came over and put a hand on my shoulder. "School Mom, please don't be offended, Ma'am. I meant to have these little baby brothers of mine squire you in a game of mahjong, how did I know I've been spoiling the little devils rotten? When they open their mouths, they have no respect for their elders!"

She jabbed Liu's forehead with her forefinger. "You,
you Smart-Cookie, you're the biggest nuisance of them all!"

She walked into the kitchen. Little Ku followed her to help bring out the food. All through dinner Wang and Liu kept wisecracking with Verdancy Chu.

After that, every week or so Verdancy Chu would pick me up to go to her place. But in all the times I was there she never said one word about the past. When we got together we'd always be busy playing mahjong. Verdancy Chu told me Little Ku didn't like any games, he just liked to fiddle around with the tiles a bit. Whenever he came from Peachgarden to Taipei on leave, Verdancy Chu would go all over to find mahjong partners for him; very often she'd even pull in the boss-lady of the Supreme Fragrance General Store at the head of the alley to make up a foursome. Whenever Little Ku played with us, Verdancy Chu wouldn't join in; she'd pull up a chair, sit right behind Little Ku and give him directions. Her legs crossed, one elbow resting on Little Ku's shoulder, she never stopped humming songs, oh, like "Ten Sighs," like "Ooh, I'm Scared of the Twilight," you name it, she would air you anything at all. Sometimes no matter how long we were playing she'd sit there and hum through the whole game.
"Tell me."

"Just when did you get so good at singing, Verdancy?"

I couldn't help asking her once; I remembered how in the past when she spoke she was afraid even to raise her voice.

"Well, when I first came to Taiwan I couldn't find a job, so I hung around with the Air Force entertainment troupe for quite a number of years and that's how I learned my business."

"Granny Ch'in, don't you know?" The Supreme Fragrance boss-lady laughed. All of us here call her 'the Radiance Pai Superior White Light.'"

"Now, Boss-lady, you're putting me on again," said Verdancy Chu. "You'd better keep your eye on your game, or else when you lose your shirt you'll be the one who wants another all-nighter."

One day, barely three or four months after I'd met Verdancy, as I was buying some marinated delicacies at the Eastgate Market on Justice Road, I ran into the Supreme Fragrance boss-lady, she was shopping for her store.

"Granny Ch'in!" The minute she saw me she caught me by the arm. "Did you hear? It's all over with that young friend of Miss Chu's. Last Saturday! They said..."
it was right there at the Peachgarden Air Base, he was in
the air only a few minutes, and then he crashed."

"I didn't know a thing about it!" I said.

The boss-lady called a pedicab over, and the two of
us went to see Verdancy. All the way there the boss-lady
kept on backbiting.

"Now how are you going to explain this? Such a
strong, healthy fellow, and pfft! he's gone. That Little
Ku had been in and out of Miss Chu's for way over two
years. At first Miss Chu said Little Ku was her foster-
brother, but the way they kept eying each other, it
didn't look like it at all. Everybody in our alley says
Miss Chu likes to eat 'spring chickens,' she only goes
particularly for those young kids in the Air Force. Can you blame her,
though? A man like Little Ku, with such a sweet temper,
who would listen to everything Miss Chu said, where would
you find another man like that? I feel so sorry for Miss
Chu!"

When we arrived at Verdancy's home, we rang the bell
for a long time; nobody answered. After a while we heard
Verdancy calling to us through the window, "School Mom,
Boss-lady, come on in, the door's unlocked."

We pushed open the door and walked up to her living
room; there was Verdancy, sitting on the window-sill,
in pink silk pyjamas; she'd rolled up the cuffs of her pants and been doing her toenails with Cutex; her hair was still in curlers.

"I spotted you two right away." She looked up at us and laughed. "The nail polish isn't dry yet, I couldn't put my shoes on to go out and open the door. Sorry to have kept you waiting — you picked the perfect time to come! This afternoon I've just cooked up a big wokful of sweet-and-sour pigsfeet; I was worried nobody'd show up to eat it. Later, when Granny Yu from across the street comes to return me those knitting-needles, the four of us'll be all set for a game of mahjong."

As she was talking, Granny Yu came in. Verdancy jumped down off the window-sill in a hurry and picked up her nail polish. "Boss-lady," she told the Supreme Fragrance boss-lady, "why don't you set the table for me. I'll go in the kitchen and get the food. This is Ladies' Day today; we're all fast on the draw after dinner we should be good for at least twenty-four rounds."

I followed Verdancy into the kitchen to give her a hand. She poured the sweet-and-sour pigsfeet out of the pot, set the pot back on the stove and started to fry a dish of "Grandma's beancurd." I stood by her, holding a plate, waiting for her to put the food on it.
"Little Ku got killed; you must have heard about it, School Mom?" Verdancy kept stir-frying the beancurd; she didn't even turn her head.

"The Supreme Fragrance boss-lady just told me, a little while ago."

"Little Ku has no relatives here; it's his schoolmates and me who took care of his funeral. Yesterday afternoon I carried his ashes to the Green Lake Air Force Cemetery and buried them."

I stood behind Verdancy, looking at her, without saying anything. Verdancy had no makeup on her face, but she still looked extraordinarily young and lively; she didn't look like a woman on the wrong side of thirty, at all; probably because her cheeks had grown full and blooming, her skin smooth and taut, the years were unable to carve any lines. Though I had a lot more years behind me than Verdancy, I felt there was no longer any need for me to find something to say to console her.

Verdancy gave the beancurd a few deft flips with a spatula and tipped it out of the wok onto my plate; she scooped up a spoonful and put it in my mouth.

"School Mom, have a taste of my hot-pepper beancurd," she laughed. "You think it's spicy enough now?"

After dinner, Verdancy set up the mahjong table
and brought out the Soochow bamboo tiles she kept for guests. As soon as we sat down to the game, Verdancy hit a Grand Three Dragons the first hand.

"Miss Chu!" protested the Supreme Fragrance boss-lady. "Since you're so lucky, you should go buy yourself a 'Patriotic Lottery' ticket!"

"You all had better look out!" Verdancy laughed. "Today my luck is going to rise again."

By the time the eigth round began, Verdancy had practically wiped out the three of us; the chips in front of her were piled all the way up to her nose. Verdancy kept laughing; she kept rolling her favorite song, "A Touch of Green," around in her mouth. Every so often she would sing:

**Aiwa, ai, aiwa,**

**Darling: if you want to pick flowers,**

**while there's time**

**do it now**