

A Touch of Green

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It was the year we won the war against Japan and moved back to our capital, Nanking. We lived in Ta-fang Alley in East Benevolence Village, one of the housing complexes for the dependents of middle- and lower-rank Air Force men. To think that after enduring all that misery for so many years in a backward province like Szechwan, we should suddenly return to the "Painted Capital" of Six Dynasties fame! Everywhere we were greeted by relics of ancient splendors and the hustle and bustle of the triumphant moment; everywhere there was an atmosphere of imperial grandeur; our eyes were continually dazzled.

At that time Wei-ch'eng was serving as commanding officer 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 kept busy with many assignments. Whenever there was an important mission to fly, he'd take the boys out himself. Sometimes, three or

four days in a week, I would not get to see so much as the back of his head. Every time he went on a mission he'd take Kuo Chen along. Kuo Chen was his favorite student; even when he was a cadet at the Air Force Academy in Kuanhsien, Szechwan, Wei-ch'eng used to say to me, "That kid is as smart as a whip! He's got a great future ahead of him." Sure enough, in just a few short years, Kuo Chen had worked his way up to squadron leader and got sent off to America for training.

Kuo Chen was an Air Force orphan. His father was a schoolmate of Wei-ch'eng's who had been killed in a plane crash when Kuo Chen was very small; and his mother had fallen ill and died soon after. While he was at the Academy, whenever New Year's and other festivals rolled around, I'd invite him over to our home for family dinner. Wei-ch'eng and I had no chick nor child, and when we saw Kuo Chen all on his lonesome we just sort of took him under our wing. In those days he had his head shaved — his scalp looked green and shiny — and he wore the mud-yellow cotton uniform of an Air Force cadet. He was a bright boy — that you could tell from everything he did and from the way he carried himself. But he was still shy with words, just a kid after all. My, it gave me a surprise the day he got back from America and came rushing over to our home in Nanking! He saluted me smartly and called me "Shih-niang."¹ I simply couldn't believe my eyes. He was all dressed up in an American-style gabardine uniform, a leather jacket with a fur collar, and a belt buckled tight with his Ray-Ban goggles-case fastened to it. He wore

his high-peaked cap with the brim pulled down to just over his eyebrows; he had let his hair grow; it was black and shiny, brushed back neatly over his ears. Only a couple of years. Who would have expected Kuo Chen to turn out to be such a dashing young officer!

“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, Shih-niang. I just saved up a few hundred dollars U.S., that’s all.”

“Aha! Enough to get yourself a wife with!” I chuckled.

“That’s right, Shih-niang!” 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, you were bound to run into some cocky flyboy parading around with a fashionably-dressed girl on his arm. Romance was in the air — every pilot who was single was talking about falling in love. Every month we’d get wedding invitations from some of Wei-ch’eng’s students. But it was more than a year since Kuo Chen had come back from America, and I hadn’t gotten the good word from him yet. Oh, once in a while he’d bring some stylish young lady or other to our house to sample my famous dish, carp cooked in bean sauce. Afterwards, though, when I asked him what was what, he’d just shake his head and laugh.

“It’s nothing, Shih-niang. I’m just having fun.”

Then, one day, he came running and told me the good news: This time it was serious. He’d fallen in love with a

student at the Ginling Middle School for Girls. Her name was Verdancy Chu.

“Shih-niang,” he told me, full of excitement, “I know you’ll like her! I want to bring her over to meet you. Shih-niang, I never thought I could be so serious about a girl!”

By this time I must say I understood Kuo Chen pretty well. He was a proud boy; he’d made his mark early, so naturally he thought rather highly of himself. Whenever we talked about his future plans he’d tell me he would never marry unless he found a girl who met his standards in every way. The young ladies he’d brought over before were all extraordinarily pretty, every one of them, but none had measured up to his expectations. I thought to myself, this girl Verdancy must be some kind of fairy maiden sent from Heaven for Kuo Chen to be so smitten.

When I did meet Verdancy, she turned out to be a total surprise. One day Kuo Chen brought her to our house for lunch. She was rather frail, a slip of a girl of eighteen or nineteen. Even though she’d come as a guest she just had on a plain blue cotton *ch’i-p’ao*, neither new nor old, with an ordinary white silk handkerchief tucked under the flap below her collar. She didn’t have a permanent; her hair was combed back tidily behind her ears. She wore plain black leather shoes with straps and a pair of cotton ankle-socks, spotlessly white. I gave her a good looking-over: her body hadn’t quite filled out yet, she seemed a bit flat-chested, and her complexion was on the pale side. But there was something limpid and graceful about her eyes it did your heart good to see. When

she saw me she kept her head half-lowered, bashfully, with a timid air that somehow reached out to you. All during lunch, no matter how hard I tried to get her to talk, she did no more than mumble a word or two in reply. Kuo Chen kept himself busy, though, helping her to food one moment and pouring her tea the next, all the while trying to prod her into making some kind of conversation.

“You see how difficult this young lady is!” Finally Kuo Chen lost patience with Verdancy. “At least she’s got something to talk about when she’s with me, but the minute she sees people she clams up. Shih-niang is no stranger, and still she acts like she’s lost her tongue!”

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

“That’s all right.” I felt rather sorry for the girl and stopped Kuo Chen. “This is Miss Chu’s first visit; of course she’s a little shy. Now don’t you pick on her. After lunch why don’t you two go for an outing on Lake Hsuanwu? The lotus flowers there are in full bloom now. It’s a gorgeous sight.”

Kuo Chen had come on his flashy new motorcycle. When they left after lunch he put Verdancy on the back seat 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. From the way he treated her I knew he was serious this time all right.

One day Wei-ch’eng came home with a frown on his face;

the minute he walked in the door he started fuming. “That kid Kuo Chen is getting to be impossible! I didn’t expect him to turn out like this.”

“What’s the matter?” I was astonished; I’d never heard Wei-ch’eng say an unpleasant word about Kuo Chen before.

“Do you have to ask me? Didn’t you know he’s been running around with a Ginling Middle School girl? He must have lost his head over her! He thinks nothing of breaking into her school any time of the day and trying to get her out, whether she’s in class or not. And that’s not all! The other day when he was up on a training flight, he actually flew over the Ginling campus and kept circling the school building! All the schoolgirls got 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 impression does that create for the outfit? One of my pilots carrying on like a lunatic. I’ll have to punish him — but good!”

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. “Shih-niang, I didn’t mean to break the regs and get Lao-shih mad at me. It’s Verdancy, she’s stolen my heart away. Honest, Shih-niang, when I’m flying up there in the sky, my heart is down here on the ground, following her around. Verdancy’s such a sweet kid, maybe a little shy and doesn’t mix with people much. Now I’ve gotten her expelled from school; her folks have wired her from Chungking to come straight home. She’d rather die than go back! She got

into a fight with her parents and broke with them. She says she'll follow me to the ends of the earth, no matter what, for the rest of her life! 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 smart people would turn foolish when they fell in love. "Since you two are so crazy about each other, why don't you go get married?"

"Shih-niang, that's just what I've come to talk to you about, and to ask you and Lao-shih to preside at the wedding." Kuo Chen beamed.

After Kuo Chen and Verdancy were married, they moved into our East Benevolence Village. Kuo Chen had two week's leave to get married; he and Verdancy had planned to go to West Lake on their honeymoon, but just before they were to leave the Civil War broke out. Wei-ch'eng and his group were ordered to Manchuria. The morning they were to take off, in the early dawn, Kuo Chen stole into my kitchen. I was just starting 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.

"Shih-niang," he said hoarsely, "This time, no matter what, I've got to rely on you to take care of —"

"I know," I interrupted him. "While you're gone, of course I'm going to look after that little wife of yours."

"Shih-niang —" Kuo Chen was still worrying. "Verdancy's too young; there's a lot she 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 Shih-niang has been with your Lao-shih all these years; I guess there’s nothing in the Air Force I haven’t seen. I don’t know how many Air Force wives have learned the ropes from me. Verdancy’s not dumb. You just leave it to me, and I’ll set her straight — 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. They had been assigned a neat little bungalow. Before they moved in, Kuo Chen had the place painted spic and span, put up new drapes, and made it an attractive little home. 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 wedding presents in their red and green wrappings, some of the packages still unopened. The table was surrounded by baskets of flowers; the roses and the gladioli were still fresh, even the phoenix-tail ferns had remained green. The wedding scrolls hadn’t been taken down yet; on the living-room wall hung a wedding plaque presented by Kuo Chen’s schoolmates, an ebony affair with gold inlaid characters:

TOGETHER THROUGH THE YEARS
TILL YOUR HAIR TURNS TO SILVER

Verdancy was in her room; she hadn’t 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 was all mussed up, the hair-ends sticking out like a bunch of twigs. She'd rumbled up their silk quilt-cover; on the traditional nuptial bedding embroidered with pairs of mandarin ducks in all the colors of the rainbow was a tear stain as big as a bowl near her face. When she heard me come in, she started and sat up; the only word she got out was "Shih-niang," and then all she could do was sob. Her face was pea-green, her eyes swollen, she looked more fragile than ever. I went over to smooth her hair down, and then wrung out a hot towel and handed it to her. Verdancy took the towel, covered her face with it, and broke down again. Outside the house military trucks and jeeps were loading and hauling off baggage; the ear-shattering clang of iron rods and chains went on and on. One after another the men of the Village were leaving for the front; there was a general commotion — women screaming and children crying. I waited until Verdancy had cried herself out. Then I patted her shoulder.

"Well, these sudden partings — the first time around, it always hits you like this. Don't cook tonight. Come have dinner with me and keep me company."

Once Wei-ch'eng and Kuo Chen were gone, we didn't have the vaguest notion where they were. One day we heard they were sent to the North, the next day they wrote us they'd flown to Central China. Several months passed, and they didn't come home once. During this time Verdancy was with me constantly. Sometimes I showed her how to cook,

sometimes I taught her knitting, and once in a while I even taught her to play a little mah-jong.

“Now this little game 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 timid with strangers. Except for coming to my place she didn’t make friends with any other families in the Village. I knew practically all their histories, so by and by I started telling Verdancy about them so she’d know something of the kind of life we lived.

“Don’t sell these people short,” I said to her. “They’ve all been through a lot. Take Mrs. Chou, for example, the lady who lives in back of you. She’s been married four times. Her present husband and the three before him were in the same squadron — they were all good friends to begin with. When one died the next took over, and so on, one by one. Sort of an understanding, you see, so that there would always be someone to take care of her. 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 the children by her first husband 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 expect them to do, cry? If they wanted to cry, they wouldn’t have waited till now.”

After Kuo Chen left, Verdancy didn’t want to go far from the Village; she just stayed close to home every day and waited. Sometimes a whole bunch of us went off to the Confucius Temple District to listen to the singsong girls, but Verdancy wouldn’t join us. She said she was afraid of missing a telephone call from headquarters 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 side trip to Nanking. Verdancy was up bright and early, dashing in and out, and she came back from market 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 had a big washrag in her hand and was swinging left and right across the windowpane with all her might.

“Verdancy!” I called out, “Kuo Chen isn’t going to see the dust way up there!”

Verdancy looked around; her face flushed when she saw me. “I don’t know what’s happened,” She mumbled. “We’ve only lived in this house a few months and it already looks old and dirty. 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. The people on duty at headquarters had promised to call around six or seven to give us any news. Verdancy had washed and changed. She wore an apricot-colored dress of light silk and, as an additional touch, a pale green ribbon in her hair — she even had some lipstick on — all in all she looked very fresh and lovely. At first she was quite gay, talking and laughing with me, but when it got to be a little past six she became tense, her face drawn, and she stopped her chatter. She was knitting and she kept looking up at the telephone on the table. We waited and waited; it was past nine o'clock before the telephone rang. Verdancy leaped up and rushed to the phone, the ball of wool in her lap fell to the floor and rolled all around, but when she got to the table she turned around to me.

“Shih-niang,” she said, 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 stopped for only two hours in Shanghai; they had flown on to northern Kiangsu at five in the afternoon. When I relayed the news to Verdancy, she went pale. For a while she stood there stunned, without uttering a sound, 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 line of work 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, my dear, Shih-niang's got something to tell you; I hope you'll listen. It's not easy to be the wife of a Flying Warrior, you know. Twenty-four long hours a day your heart is trailing up there after him. You can gaze at the sky, and look and look, until your eyes run with blood, but your men up there won't even know. They're just like so many iron birds — one moment they fly to the east, the next moment they fly to the west; you just can't catch them. Since you're married into our Village, Verdancy, please don't mind if I speak frankly to you: you've just got to harden your heart in order to endure the storm and stress that is to come."

Verdancy stared at me through her tears, nodding her head, only 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,² our side began to lose ground everywhere in the Civil War. As the battles in the North grew more ferocious, quite a few families in our Village got bad news. Some of the wives took to going to the temples every day to plead with the gods and pester the Bodhisattvas; others went to fortune-tellers to learn what their future would hold; still others went to physiognomists to have their bones felt. I've never believed in all that mumbo jumbo myself. Whenever I had no word from Wei-ch'eng over a long spell, I'd invite my neighbors in for a

game of mah-jong to last 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 — it was over Hsueh — he and his plane were dashed to pieces. When I rushed to Verdancy's house, it was packed with people. Verdancy was slumped backward on a chair, a woman on either side of her, holding her down by the arms; a white towel tied around her head; on the towel you could see a bloodstain as big as your hand. As soon as I came in everybody started talking at once: A little while before, when Verdancy got the news, she ran right to the end of the Village, Kuo Chen's uniform in her arms, howling as she ran; she kept screaming she wanted to go search for Kuo Chen. When people tried to stop her, she started kicking and lashing out as though she'd gone mad. The instant she was outside the Village entrance she dashed her head against an iron telephone pole and drove a big hole in her forehead; when she was carried back, she could hardly utter a sound.

I went over to Verdancy, took a bowl of hot ginger broth from somebody, forced a brass spoon between her teeth, and got a couple of spoonfuls down her throat. Her face was like a fish's belly gashed open; splotches of red and white, blood and sweat all over. Her eyes stared wide open, unseeing. She didn't cry, but her pale lips were opening and closing, a shrill, small noise kept coming from her throat, as if somebody and

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 mah-jong that 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, and 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, you mustn't let yourself waste 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 and his body was dashed to 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, half crying and half laughing, a terrible 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 told her not to marry an airman. She wouldn't listen to me — now see what a mess she's in!"

They just carried Verdancy out of the bed as she was, hair all tangled and face unwashed, called a cart and hauled her off, bedding and all. Only a few days after Verdancy had gone, the rest of us, too, started to flee the war and left Nanking.

2



Ever since we came to Taipei years ago I've been living on Changchun Road. By sheer coincidence this housing complex for Air Force families is also called East Benevolence Village, but there's no connection whatever 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, the times have been peaceful these years, and the days go by easily for me. Our Air Force recreational activities are just as good as the ones in the Nanking days — a Peking opera one day, a dance performance the next. Every time they present something novel I like to go to an evening show and join in the fun.

One year, on New Year's Day, the Air Force New Life Club put on an evening of entertainment. People said it was the most elaborate in years. Somebody sent me two tickets, so I went, and took along the Li girl, my neighbor's teenage daughter. When we arrived at the New Life Club, the pro-