

鍾曉陽：翠袖

Greensleeves

By Zhong Xiaoyang

Translated by Cathy Poon

CHEN CUIXIU—Greensleeves—came gracefully out, wearing a knee-length green pleated dress with a small collar, piped short sleeves, and a row of round buttons down the front. Mr and Mrs Chen, speaking almost in unison, introduced her to Wo Gengyun—Tiller. She nodded to him with a smile and took a seat to one side.

Tiller carefully sized her up out of the corner of his eye and was pleased with what he saw. When he learned through their casual conversation that she was actually a primary school teacher and not just an uneducated person, his mind worked even faster. From the side, Mrs Yao was giving a run-down of many of Greensleeves' fine attributes, and Tiller listened without comment. Greensleeves' short hair, he noticed, hung down and covered one of her cheeks, but with each toss of the head, her hair swung back, revealing a crescent-shaped dimple on her rounded cheek. She had very fair skin, which looked like white jade against the emerald that was her leaf-green dress. A loose green thread was hanging from her piped sleeve down her arm—a vein of emerald in the white jade, a sign of spring in the snow.

Tiller was still discussing the outside world with Mr Chen. He would rather have been talking a bit more with Greensleeves, to find out more about her, but knew not what to say. Couldn't really ask her about her age—that would be rude. As he already knew what she did for a living, there seemed little else left to ask her. As if sensing his predicament, Greensleeves pulled her chair towards him after a while and asked, "Do you come to Shanghai often, Mr Wo?"

Born in Guangzhou in 1962 and brought up in Hong Kong, Zhong Xiaoyang is recognized as one of Hong Kong's most talented young writers. She received her B.A. in film-making from the University of Michigan.

"At least twice a year, generally," he replied.

"Oh, is that so? How nice," said Greensleeves with a smile, and the dimple on her right cheek appeared again in all its intoxicating sweetness. "You must come to see us more often, Mr Wo, now that we're friends . . . Are you here on business? Or visiting relatives?"

"I always come to see my brother. He and his family live near—."

"Auntie Yao said you're in the import-export business. What exactly do you deal in, may I ask?"

"Oh, I deal in chemicals . . ."

The exchange, once started, proceeded smoothly. Greensleeves was the more eloquent speaker and her clear, sweet voice echoed in the room like an oriole's song. As she was talking, she felt something tickling her arm. Looking down, she saw the loose bit of green thread. "What a nuisance," she murmured to herself as she tried to tear it off. But she tore the wrong way, pulling the end of her sleeve together like a concertina. Reminding herself that it would be impolite to bite it off in front of her guests, she grudgingly rose from her seat in search of a pair of scissors, which, as it turned out, were nowhere to be found. She bustled around opening and closing drawers in the small sitting room, and Tiller felt a bit dizzy as he watched her green and white figure darting about.

"Where have they gone?" Greensleeves grumbled as she searched.

As this was going on, her younger brother, a man in his twenties, returned home from work. After he had said hello to Tiller, Greensleeves asked him if he had taken the scissors. He went to his room to fetch them and snipped off the thread for her. She smiled at Tiller and explained, "We used to have several pairs of scissors around the house, but thanks to dear brother we only have one pair left now." She was standing with her back to the sun-lit window, and the light filtering through gave her attractive face a hazy glow.

Tiller enjoyed the visit so much he even stayed for dinner. Mrs Yao then hinted that he should act quickly if he was pleased with the choice.

Tiller, originally from Shanghai, had gone to Hong Kong in his youth and, after groping his way along for some time, built up his business. He had married and had two sons, but his wife had died of illness. Near fifty now, with his two sons married with families of their own, and his younger son helping with the business, he had time to think about himself. Feeling that it would be miserable to spend his last years in loneliness, he began to look openly for a second wife. With his wealth, he shouldn't have had any problem finding one in Hong Kong. But then those interested in his money were mostly young girls working in factories, who felt that he was *not* old enough—with any luck he could still last a good many years. In any case, he did not think much of such girls. Most of the older and more capable women weren't interested, and those who were he found old and ugly. So this business of looking for a second wife dragged on. These days it was quite the thing for high-and-dry bachelors to go wife-hunting back in their native villages, after which they would apply to the authorities for their wives to join them in Hong Kong. Thinking that it might be a good idea to marry a Shanghai woman who would probably get along well with him, he joined the wife-hunt

and returned to Shanghai. When they learned about this, all his relatives and friends there went out of their way to please him. Mrs Yao, a distant relative, thought of the Chen's daughter and arranged a meeting for him. Tiller knew that it would probably come to nothing; he went just to see how things would go. To his surprise he'd found someone he liked. Greensleeves was turning thirty, which couldn't have been better. Her parents were intellectuals, and she herself was naturally poised and likeable.

The Chens were retired and always there to receive Tiller warmly when he called. As it was summer vacation, Greensleeves did not have to teach. She was sometimes at home and sometimes out, so the two did not have much opportunity to get to know each other better. One day, Tiller came calling again. Mrs Chen handed him a cup of tea and said, "Mr Wo, it's a shame we haven't shown you around. Now that Greensleeves doesn't have to teach school, why not let her show you around one of these days?" For Tiller, a native of Shanghai, there was really nothing much to see. It was quite obvious that Mrs Chen was trying to give them some time together.

Tiller took the hint and began dating Greensleeves. Most of the time they went to the Bund and strolled near the Garden Bridge. As the place was quite a long way from Greensleeves' house, they usually took the bus. Shanghai was a crowded place. It was packed with people wherever you went and walking side by side with your companion in the streets was quite impossible. Greensleeves walked very fast. Tiller, because of his age, was rather slow and could never keep up with her. Sometimes he only had glimpses of her sleeves through the crowd. He sensed that Greensleeves was a lot cooler towards him of late, but he knew perfectly well what was going on in the mind of a young woman like her. She would not easily let go of such an eligible catch, but now that she was confident she had him safe in her hands, she started to play cool and hard to get. Yet he did hope to marry Greensleeves.

It was overcast and windy that day. After dinner they walked all the way to the Garden Bridge. The wind was even gustier up on the bridge, ruffling the hair and clothes of the pedestrians, making them look more dashing than usual, as if they were all hurrying to a banquet or something. Greensleeves had Tiller tell her about Hong Kong, and she burst into clear laughter every time something caught her fancy. Her deep dimple and ringing laughter seemed to have merged with the night scenery of the Suzhou Creek. They stood against the railing. Greensleeves used both hands to hold down her short hair as it whipped around her face, and rested her elbows on the iron railing as she stared at the quietly flowing river. After casting a fleeting glance in his direction, she suddenly grasped the railing and, using it to lift herself off the ground, kicked both legs up behind her and pushed her chest out over the railing. Tiller was completely stunned. He thought his heart was going to leap out of his chest, and was immensely relieved when she caught herself in the nick of time. He made a move towards the railing and was only just able to restrain himself. Her behaviour was really too much for him. Greensleeves swiftly came back to the ground and smiled at him before turning to look at the bleak and hazy night scene over the river. Yellow and green lights dotted the horizon, the green lights a peppermint green which melted into the river with the same chilly sensation pepper-

mint drops leave in one's mouth. Goose-pimples crept swiftly up her back. "Ah-choo!" Quickly pulling out a handkerchief from her sleeve, she blew her nose and then replaced the handkerchief. Standing by her side, Tiller thought to himself: I still have work to do in Hong Kong. I've already prolonged my stay here one whole week. Can't put off leaving much longer. He had hoped to ask Mrs Yao to propose to the Chen family on his behalf, but on second thought, he felt it would perhaps be more sincere for him to propose to Greensleeves directly. Just then, watching Greensleeves, he found her lovelier than he ever remembered. He just could not let her go. Availing himself of the next opening, he said, "Let's get married, Greensleeves."

A strong gust of wind suddenly swept up from nowhere. Greensleeves flung her hands up to hold her hair in place. The handkerchief in her sleeve had not been tucked in firmly enough, and as she raised her arm it slipped out and drifted with the wind down the river. They reached out simultaneously to try to retrieve it. But they acted too late and could only watch it glide from side to side as it sailed down the river.

After this interruption, they both seemed too embarrassed to bring up the subject of marriage again. But some time later, Tiller said, "Why don't you go home and think about it. You can give me your answer in a couple of days."

Greensleeves, brushing away a few stray hairs caught between her lips, cast him a glance and lowered her head. "There's no need for that. My answer is yes," she said.

Tiller nodded with a smile and turned to walk her home. She thought he would have reacted warmly and shown how excited he was. But he had taken it so coolly. Perhaps when one gets old, one treats everything coolly. She turned to look at her handkerchief, floating in the inky river like the broken wing of a white sea-gull.

The following spring Tiller returned to Shanghai to make arrangements for their wedding. As he only had a few friends and relatives in the city, and had ceased to have contact with most of them anyway, it wasn't exactly an extravagant affair. After the wedding he took Greensleeves to Suzhou and Hangzhou for their honeymoon.

Suzhou is a small town, where most tourists just stop over, like dragonflies skimming over the surface of water, never staying for long. Because of all the comings and goings, one never feels hemmed in. They arrived on a spring day, which happened to be chilly and drizzly. Seeing that the drizzle was likely to go on for some time, they bought themselves a big black umbrella. Suzhou had a pristine elegance about it as people holding umbrellas and wearing boots staggered along the streets and alleys. The barges with their oars tied up were moored along the canals, and for once even the oarsmen's song was stilled. Tiller and Greensleeves walked shoulder to shoulder under their umbrella—never before had they been so close to each other. Greensleeves looked at his hand on the umbrella, wrinkled and covered with brownish freckles, and felt a strange bond with her husband.

In the morning they took a taxi to some of the famous Suzhou gardens: Linger Garden, Happy Garden, West Garden, and the Forest of Lions Garden, and had lunch at the Pine and Crane Restaurant. Because of the rain, it was muddy

everywhere and everything was wet and cold. Neither of them really felt in the mood. The taxi driver came along too and explained that the Qing Qianlong Emperor had visited the Pine and Crane during one of his southern excursions and had pronounced one of the dishes there the best in the world. Actually it was just rice crust, nothing special. After lunch the driver took them to a nearby sweets shop, Caizhizhai. Once there, Greensleeves was beside herself with joy and couldn't wait to push her way into the crowd. Tiller, affected by her mood, bought a big bagful of sweets for her.

That afternoon they went to the Humble Administrator's Garden, and stopped for a rest at the Fangyan Pavilion. They could see the distant trees being cleansed by the clouds and the willows dotting the dykes being washed by the rain. Everything that greeted their eyes was green. Putting a sweet into her mouth, Greensleeves said haltingly, "I heard it's very difficult to leave the country these days."

"Don't worry. I'll see what I can do," said Tiller.

Greensleeves smiled, pleased with what she had heard. Tiller watched her cheeks swell with her smile, the dimple sinking so deep it looked like a second pair of lips. He couldn't help asking, "I've always wondered why a girl like you has stayed single all these years?"

"Single? Aren't I married now?"

Tiller laughed heartily at this. Greensleeves used a finger to remove a piece of sweet which had stuck between her teeth before continuing, "I used to have a boyfriend, but we broke up two years ago."

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"Oh," he responded. "Had you two known each other long?"

"Uh-huh. But later, I . . . I didn't want to marry him."

He nodded, digging his hand into the bag for a sweet. She cast him a sidelong glance. He still looked reasonably young. Luckily he wasn't bald, and his looks weren't revolting. What more could she expect? Having turned thirty, she didn't have much choice anyway. Besides, he wasn't too bad. At least he was sincere and kindly, and the fact that they were both from Shanghai brought them that much closer together. The more she thought about his good points, the more confused she felt, and tears streamed down her cheeks. She hastily turned to hide her face behind a pillar and pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve to wipe her eyes. Fortunately Tiller hadn't noticed.

The trip to Suzhou and Hangzhou brought Tiller and Greensleeves much closer together. After this, Tiller came back to see her every couple of months. And he no longer stayed with his brother. He would book a room in one of the hotels and have Greensleeves join him there for a few days.

A year or so later, through Tiller's efforts, Greensleeves was granted permission to join her husband in Hong Kong, and moved into Tiller's flat on Waterloo Road. It was a three-storey building and they lived on the top floor. The interior had been decorated by a well-known local designer. The sitting room was done in maroon, set off by a suite of off-white couches, with a small bar in the corner. At the end of the hallway leading to the master bedroom there was a small wooden structure. Greensleeves opened the door and asked, "What's this for?" "It's a sauna. I spend ten minutes or so in there every evening before going to bed," replied Tiller.

Greensleeves shrugged and went into the bedroom, which was thickly carpeted in greyish green. There were white curtains patterned with green bamboos, while the white wall-paper also had pale green motifs. The bed-cover was greyish green, and even the pendant lamp hanging from the ceiling was green, a dark green like an empty Coca Cola bottle. She was sizing up the room as Tiller said, "I've just had the place redecorated. Everything was brown before."

"So autumn has turned into spring," said Greensleeves with a smile. Tiller smiled back. "How do you keep such a big place tidy?"

"We have part-time maids here in Hong Kong. They work a couple of hours a day, cleaning up and doing the laundry. All we need to do ourselves is cook our meals."

"Oh," Greensleeves walked up to the dressing table and sat down. In the mirror she could see herself and Tiller, and the mirror reflected the long life they would spend together.

Greensleeves' reflection in the mirror soon took on a new look. Her hair was permed, her eyebrows trimmed down to two fine seductive lines that slanted upwards. Her eyes were enhanced by liner and her lips reddened. Her manicured finger-nails and toe-nails were painted red and she could move as sure-footedly as a mountain goat in her three-inch high heels. But she only wore heavy makeup on special occasions. The rest of the time she retained her clean and fresh look. She knew that her freshness was a rare quality.

It did not take long for Tiller to feel confident in taking his wife out in society.

Everyone praised his choice. Attending proper classes is obviously a more effective way of learning than studying on one's own; Greensleeves completed her course under the tutelage of her husband's friends' wives. She could tell you which restaurant had the best chef in town, which cinema had comfortable seats, which cosmetics were imitations of famous brands, the name of the film star who had just given birth to a daughter, and how much the baby weighed. When Tiller returned home from work it was the blast of the tape-recorder or television, rather than the endearing voice of his wife that greeted him. It was as if the whole flat had become a tape-recorder or television set, and he had just stepped into it. As time went on, Greensleeves began gossiping about people—people they knew and people they did not know. She was critical in her comments and judgments, and her conclusions were invariably worldly-wise. Tiller was convinced that she was turning incorrigibly into a vulgar urbanite. At one time, he had thought of her laughter as an oriole's sweet song but now it had turned into a series of electric shocks, withering everything in its path. However, he tolerated her. At the very least, he needed her for socializing.

They did quarrel, though, over household expenses. For Greensleeves, the more she had to spend the better; but for Tiller, it was too much however small the amount. Besides, Greensleeves was forever trying to get him to send more money to her family, and he was not always ready to oblige.

Tiller preferred to put his spare money into the stock market. Before Greensleeves had any idea what it was all about, she used to hear him talking on the phone about buying, selling, rising and falling several times a day. Later she learned that the calls were about shares, and that the person at the other end of the line was a stock-broker named Huang, whom she had met a couple of times at Tiller's birthday parties. Huang probably had not made much money for Tiller, for he had recently been replaced by a Mr Lu. Since then the calls had been longer, and there

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was more laughter. Presumably they got on better. Many a night Tiller talked excitedly on the phone while Greensleeves lay in bed watching a kung-fu series on the television. When he finished his calls he would go into his sauna, come out, shower and go to sleep as she lay there admiring her T.V. idol.

It was at Tiller's fifty-third birthday party that she met this Mr Lu. Autumn had already set in and she'd had a full-length evening cheongsam of crimson velvet decorated with sequins specially made for the occasion. She even wore her silvery grey mink stole. The banquet was held in a VIP room in a restaurant. Tiller's two sons stood at the entrance greeting the guests. A young man in a light blue suit walked in shortly after the party began. He seemed to know the elder son well, and they stood there shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries. Greensleeves had never seen him before, but couldn't help noticing his good looks. Later Tiller introduced them. "This is Lu Zhichong." Then he turned towards her and said, "My wife."

"Ah, your money-god," Greensleeves teased.

"See, even my wife has heard about you," Tiller said as he smiled at Lu Zhichong.

"Have a seat, Mr Lu, enjoy yourself," said Greensleeves, letting her glance linger on him. She consoled herself with the observation that he must only be in his early thirties. In fact, he couldn't be more than twenty-eight the way he looked.

She walked away to greet her other guests, but rather absently, her eyes kept drifting from time to time in his direction, moving away only after she'd caught a glimpse of him. She was also aware that he was looking at her. Her posture and gestures became more enticing as she carried on talking and smiling like the good hostess she was.

Standing at a distance, Lu Zhichong watched her circulating among the guests, the sequins on her cheongsam flashing silvery lights, the high slits revealing glimpses of her shapely legs, which he was sure would be very fair. A pity that the flesh-coloured stockings she was wearing somewhat diminished their sheen. That day Greensleeves was wearing her long hair in a bun, held in place by a diamond hairpin which glittered and caught everyone's eye, the nape of her rounded neck showing under the bun. Zhichong thought she should have worn a bare-necked dress. He could visualize the mink stole hanging over her fair, curved shoulders, creating a sharp and exciting contrast between hot and cold. Towards the end of the evening, when the person sitting next to Greensleeves left the table to chat with his friends, Zhichong moved up and seated himself next to her. Knowing that he was trying to make advances to her, she felt rather nervous, as if he were trampling on her heart with each step he took.

"Are you from Shanghai, Mrs Wo?"

"Uh-huh," Greensleeves smiled.

"How long have you been here?"

"Oh, over two years now."

"No problem adapting?"

"I'm fine."

"Like it here?"

Not knowing what to say in reply, Greensleeves shook her head and smiled vaguely at him. Zhichong then changed the subject. For her sake, they spoke in Mandarin. His Mandarin was not good, but he spoke with ease, staring at her boldly all the while. His were eyes that seemed to know all and take in all. Greensleeves was exhilarated by his company and began to talk more. Suddenly Zhichong looked down and asked, "Hey, why do you tuck your handkerchief in your sleeve like that? It's no longer fashionable, you know."

"Habit, I guess," Greensleeves smiled. "It's perfumed. Have a whiff," she said, pulling out the handkerchief and putting it under his nose. Totally unprepared for such a move, Zhichong drew back. Greensleeves also withdrew her hand and smiled at him. He had no idea she was so forward, so bold. Luckily she was already someone else's wife. She was certainly not a woman to trifle with. Just then the other guest returned and Zhichong had to leave.

When it was time to see the guests off, Greensleeves and Zhichong shook hands and bade each other good-bye. She could feel the moisture passing from the palm of his hand to hers as he gave it a tight squeeze.

One morning, even before Greensleeves had washed and done her hair, the door-bell rang. Tiller must have forgotten something and had sent someone for it, she thought. But when she opened the door, it was Zhichong standing there, one hand on the door frame, all smiles. Greensleeves stepped back and smiled in surprise, "Oh, it's you! What brings you here? Do come in."

Zhichong stepped in, but noticing the thick carpet, asked, "Should I take my shoes off?"

"That would be best," she smiled, kicking him a pair of carpet slippers.

He bent down to change his shoes. "You know, if I take my shoes off, the cockroaches in your house won't stand a chance. You can save money on insect-spray."

It took Greensleeves quite a while to get his meaning. "That penny-pincher would sure like that," she said, and burst out laughing. As she talked, she continued brushing her hair, pulling her head to the side with each stroke.

"Have you had breakfast yet?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you."

"How about a cup of coffee?"

"Lovely," said Zhichong, slumping onto a couch. He was wearing a safari suit which showed off his tall and well-shaped body to the best advantage, and he looked very smart from every angle.

Greensleeves went into the kitchen and busied herself making coffee. "Is Mr Wo out?" asked Zhichong over the rattle of cups and saucers.

"What took you so long to find that out?" Greensleeves' voice shot back from the kitchen. Then, after a pause, she shouted, "Don't you have to go to work today?"

"It's my day off."

"And you've taken the trouble to come to my place?"

"I came to see how you're doing. Is that all right?" he protested.

They continued shouting at each other in this fashion, their words shooting

back and forth like darts, a very exhausting exercise. Zhichong walked over to the window. The breeze had a touch of autumn in it, and as it passed by it crept stealthily in to lift a corner of the curtain. The house faced a flyover, which was so close that, if you stood at the window, it felt as if the passing cars were boring their way through your forehead. "Don't you find the noise a bit much with the flyover right here in front of you?" he asked, still in a loud voice, not really expecting an answer. He whirled around, and there she was, just across the room, elegantly holding a tray bearing two cups of coffee. Zhichong had intended to look in the direction of the kitchen, but now his line of vision had been cut off, the way one's future is sometimes cut off.

"I'm used to it, just like you've got used to talking in this loud voice," said Greensleeves, smiling charmingly. She raised the tray a little and said, "Sorry, it's instant, not brewed."

"That's all right." He took a seat, then added, "Why didn't you brew some?"

"Takes too long. I'm dying for a cup of coffee," she said, stirring her coffee with a small spoon.

"Dying to come back, huh," he teased.

Greensleeves glared at him and, picking up the small spoon still dripping coffee, hit him on the back of his hand, leaving a brownish stain. He licked it off, relishing the taste, and looking at her invitingly. Her heart twitched a little, and she hastily lowered her head to sip her coffee, spilling a drop on her pink dressing gown. Zhichong pulled out his handkerchief to wipe it off for her, his hand inadvertently brushing against her breast as he did so. She gave no indication that she'd noticed. "I'll go get changed," she said as she got up.

She put on a sleeveless dress with black and white stripes, which Zhichong teasingly said made her look like a zebra. Seeing that she didn't have any handkerchief under her arm, he advanced with his own and said, "I thought you liked having this there." As he said this, he stuck his handkerchief into her armpit, taking the opportunity to tickle her there. Giggling uncontrollably, she fell into his lap, hissing and burbling with laughter, her body twisting and wriggling in his arms like a water-snake. He fondled and squeezed her shapely breasts, while continuing to tickle her. Greensleeves struggled but was unable to free herself. In the end she slumped onto the floor, breathless from all the giggling, and lay there, looking up at him through half-closed eyes. Just as he was about to help her up, the door-bell rang. Greensleeves let out a cry, looked at her watch, and struggled to her feet with his help. "It's the maid," she said, smoothing her dress and her ruffled hair, and went to open the door.

The maid came in, nodded to him and went about her job. Greensleeves glanced at him with a suppressed smile. Zhichong was sitting there with his legs crossed, looking despondent, blaming himself for his miscalculation, for overlooking this possibility. Naturally they couldn't do anything with the maid there. Zhichong felt dejected and left shortly afterwards.

Having learned his lesson, Zhichong made a point of calling on her after the maid had left. As he did not have that many holidays, and Tiller was there in the evenings, their time together was rather limited.

Tiller spoke to him on the phone in the evenings as usual. Sometimes, when Greensleeves answered the phone, Zhichong would affect a foreign manner and say, "Hi, honey, get me that penny-pincher." A snickering Greensleeves would then go and fetch Tiller. After that she would be distracted all evening, unable to concentrate on the T.V. soap opera, thinking about that man at the other end of the line. One evening, she heard Tiller saying into the phone, "You must come here for dinner some time. How about Sunday? . . ."

"What's up?" Greensleeves asked as soon as he hung up.

"Lu Zhichong earned a hundred and thirty grand for me. I've asked him to come over for dinner this Sunday to thank him. Why don't you go ahead and plan us some good dishes," Tiller smiled.

"Oh, don't be so stingy," she said, her mouth twitching. "He made over a hundred thousand for you, he deserves a proper restaurant meal." Deep down, though, she was greatly excited.

Zhichong told Tiller he would come over at six, but he showed up just after four and changed into a pair of slippers at the door like a regular visitor. Greensleeves was wearing a knee-length sarong-style dress with long sleeves, which had a thick jungle pattern in straw-yellow and army-green. She was picking the ends off bean sprouts in the dining room. Zhichong took a seat next to her and watched her work. "Where's the old man?" he asked.

"Taking his nap," she continued without looking at him. Although she was looking down, there was still that provocative look about the corners of her eyes.

The dining table was in the innermost part of the room with no direct sunlight. The lights were not yet on, and in that part of the room it appeared that dusk had arrived prematurely. Greensleeves wore her hair down that day, which made her face look leaner. Zhichong, however, paid no attention to this. His attention was on her shapely shoulders, with her loose army-green sleeves rolled up to show her two rounded arms. A real woman!

They sat there in silence. Zhichong was a little impatient; he kept shaking his right foot rapidly and anxiously, his slipper hanging loosely on his toes. Eventually his slipper dropped to the floor with a thud. Trying to retrieve it with his foot, he only succeeded in kicking it further and further away, and had to squat down to look for it. Greensleeves' bare feet were half in her slippers, her legs so white in the dark that they seemed to have a green sheen. Rounded calves and full ankles. Zhichong grabbed her ankle in his hand, saying, "My, my, such a full ankle. If I didn't have such big hands I don't think I would be able to get around it." She kicked him hard in the face with her free leg, slipper and all. He scrambled backwards, frantically rubbing his hair and face. "What do you think you're doing?" he said, rather crossly, and then headed for the kitchen to have a wash without even looking back at her.

"Careful, the old man has been asleep for over an hour now. He'll wake up any time. You'll be in trouble if he catches you."

"Why? Are you afraid of him?"

"That's for me to know."

When he came back, Greensleeves was taking the bean sprouts into the kitchen.

He tried to stop her, but she managed to get by. He knew these businessmen's wives inside out—they're all lonely and frustrated women. When she came out, he tried again to stop her, but she slipped past with a twirl and a drop of her shoulder, and stood to one side, arms crossed, eyeing him coquettishly. He was a bit carried away and said tenderly, "It's a real pity that a woman like you ended up married to that old man."

"I don't think so," Greensleeves shrugged. "At least what I've gained is beyond figuring while what I've lost is easy enough to tally."

"But one of the things you lost could well be your everything," Zhichong whispered suggestively to her.

She glared at him, startled by what he had said. He, too, was startled. What he had just said was really a bit over the top. What if she believed him and decided to place all her hopes on him? That would be disastrous.

"It's really bad luck, you know," Greensleeves forced a smile. "A couple of years ago the old man still went to Japan and Taiwan from time to time on business. Now that his youngest son has taken over he doesn't make such trips any more. Otherwise you could come in the evenings."

Zhichong, not daring to provoke her any further, sat down on the couch farthest from her. He had no intention of sleeping with her. Once you sleep with a woman, she starts thinking of herself as your wife and it can be impossible to shake her off. He didn't want to have a long-term relationship with her. She was a few years older than him, but in a few years she would be several times as old.

He therefore restrained himself and concentrated on leafing through a magazine until Tiller woke up.

Zhichong had a very good sense of timing and strong will-power. Once he made up his mind, nothing could put him off. If Tiller had begun to suspect anything at all, it was because of Greensleeves. She emanated a wild and seductive kind of passion which lingered long after Zhichong had gone, and Tiller was struck by it. But she was completely unaware of this. She hated Tiller for being such a fool, for not finding out after all this time. She would rather that he knew, so that she could start a nasty quarrel, divorce him and marry Zhichong. She believed that the love between her and Zhichong would remain firm and constant.

That night, Greensleeves kept thinking about what Zhichong had said, weighing his words again and again, and found that they weighed more and more heavily on her heart. She felt suffocated and started sobbing. Tiller was sound asleep by her side, snoring, and heard nothing. She tossed and turned and cried even louder. She cried so hard that she nearly choked. Tiller finally let out a soft moan. Greensleeves stared at him. She felt wronged, terribly wronged, being married to him. She gave him a push. "What is it?" he mumbled, opening his eyes a crack. Greensleeves just wept and said nothing. Tiller, more awake now, saw the glimmer of tears and more or less guessed the reason. He had noticed that the atmosphere at the dinner table was somewhat unusual. When there's something going on between a man and a woman, even the air around them changes. They could fool no one around them, because those people were breathing the same air. He rolled over drowsily, not wanting all this, not wanting to face it at all. He only hoped that it would all be a

thing of the past when he woke up.

Helplessly, Greensleeves propped herself up and sat there thinking, her dressing gown over her shoulders, as tears once again rolled down her face. Still sobbing, she bent down and pulled a suitcase out from under the bed, threw in some clothes, got changed in the dark and walked out, suitcase in hand. Zhichong had given her his address. She could go to him.

When Tiller woke up and found the other side of the bed empty, he just lay there staring blankly at the pendant lamp. The lamp, like an eye socket, the globe its eyeball, stared back. He remembered the glimmer of tears he'd vaguely seen last night. He didn't quite understand the expression behind the tears then. Time seemed to have stopped at that particular point, and he was slowly coming to see what had happened. He'd felt very tired last night from the wine at dinner and had had many dreams. He'd little expected to find her gone in the morning without even a warning. He got up, washed and made himself breakfast in a daze, and began to think of the many nice things about Greensleeves. He should have known that this would happen, but what did she want of him? All she had ever done for him anyway was cook and clean. And he, as the husband, had given her plenty of money to spend. Although he was sometimes a bit grudging about her extravagances, he always gave way in the end. He had given her everything! Women are never satisfied these days! He finished his breakfast moodily and went to the bathroom with the day's paper and, as usual, spent half an hour there.

He dozed off on the bus, his head slumped over his paper as if there were no bones in his neck. As the bus bumped along, the reading glasses on the bridge of his nose also bumped up and down, and slipped lower and lower until they were about to drop off. A kind-hearted fellow passenger grabbed them and said, "Careful, sir!" He woke with a start, hastily took his glasses off and thanked the man. He wasn't really in the mood for reading the paper, put his glasses away and looked around, overcome with grief. That evening he dined out all by himself and, reluctant to go home, went to a 7:30 show afterwards. It was raining when he came out of the cinema.

If you have a home, you'll go back to it sooner or later. It was nearly ten by the time he reached home. As soon as he entered the flat, he saw light coming from the kitchen, emanating warmth. There was someone moving around, and the clatter of dishes. Greensleeves came out, her hair tied back, looking fresh and tidy. Without looking his way, she went into the sitting room to fetch the ashtrays that had been there since the night before, saying, "You could have called to say you wouldn't be back for dinner. I waited all evening and have only just eaten."

When she walked past Tiller, she stopped suddenly and, looking at his trouser legs, said, "Oh, is it raining outside?"

"Yes," he nodded, "but it's only sprinkling."

"Take them off, I'll give them a soak," she said, looking at him for the first time before heading into the kitchen to wash the ashtrays.

"Don't bother," he said, following her into the kitchen. "It's getting late. Leave them for the maid; they're not too wet anyway."

"No, I don't trust the maid. She made a mess of our couch covers. Anyway,

the stains come off more easily after soaking.”

Tiller could only let her have her way. He remembered how when they first met she had looked high and low for a pair of scissors just because there was a loose thread on her sleeve. She was the type that would never rest until she had fixed what she thought needed fixing.

He did not bother taking his sauna and headed straight for the bathroom. Greensleeves took the clothes he had left on the bed and soaked them. Coming back, she could still hear water splashing in the bathroom, so she went to bed first. Last night had really been absurd. She had climbed up seven flights of stairs in the dark to get to Zhichong's home. A cramped little flat it was, and all eight people in the family had got out of bed to see who was calling. Zhichong looked ghastly, and unceremoniously put her up in his sister's room. Away from the others, he told her she had acted too rashly, that she should have told him first and talked this over with him. Suddenly she understood. He was so poor, and had such a big family to support. She could not make him suffer, or make herself suffer for that matter. Thus she had come home first thing in the morning.

Tiller came out of the bathroom steaming fresh and carefully lay down next to her. Neither said anything. After a good while, he said unhurriedly, “I'm going to retire soon. Then I can be with you all the time.”

She remained silent. Turning over, he saw her gazing at the ceiling. Her dimple had disappeared because she wasn't smiling, and it seemed that she no longer had that intoxicating look. He felt something tickling his arm outside the blanket, and looking down, saw that it was a loose thread from the sleeve of Greensleeves' peppermint-coloured pajamas. He picked it up and rolled it between his fingers. “It's coming apart,” he said softly, as if to hint. Greensleeves took a pair of scissors from the bed-side table and cut it off.

Everything was quiet again. Greensleeves turned over with her back to him. Then, suddenly remembering something, she said, “Mrs Liu rang this evening about Mrs Fan's second son. Remember him? We met him at the Xuxiangyuan Restaurant last week, the lanky one with the gold-rimmed glasses. Didn't they say he was getting married? I heard that the invitations have already been sent out. But now he's dumped his fiancée. They say he's after a rich girl, who's also said to be engaged to someone else. To think that she would break her engagement for Mrs Fan's son. The two of them are getting married now. Mrs Fan is going out of her mind. I would too if I were her. Young people these days really have no sense of shame. They're so mixed up. Really, anything can happen in this world.”

She said all this in one breath, then turned off the light with a click and went to sleep.