

Lost River

It was one of those glorious July days that came all too infrequently during the English summer and Jasmine took it as a special welcome to mark her return to London after more than thirty years. She luxuriated in the brilliant sunshine as she strolled from the Savoy, past the crowds on the Strand and down towards the Embankment.

A few heads turned upon her passing. The fact that she could still produce such an effect at the age of fifty gave her a momentary glow of satisfaction. Her smooth skin and her black hair, gathered in a stylish chignon, certainly disguised her age, while the designer dress from Harrods showed to advantage her small, trim figure. A necklace of Mikimoto pearls conferred an additional touch of elegance.

But it was really her deportment that was arresting. There was a certain majesty in her carriage, with every movement feline and supple and a joy to behold. That kind of grace could only have come from long training as a ballet dancer.

On reaching the Embankment, Jasmine followed the walkway alongside the Thames. The placid river was shimmering with sunlight and a light river breeze brushed her like a whispering caress. It was a day in which a person ought to be bursting with the joy of being alive. And yet she was being bothered by an unsettling ambivalence. It was as if she had some pressing task to complete and yet dreaded getting down to it. Thus her stroll seemed an evasion.

She had taken that same aimless walk for the past three days, ever since Pong went home to leave her to that extra week in London that she wanted. If she did not sort herself out quickly, she would go out of her mind.

After a while Jasmine stopped, as she had done on previous days, and leaned her arms against the thick stone wall bordering the river. The fingers of one hand played with her string of pearls. Her tilted, Oriental eyes gazed for a long while at nothing in particular, hardly taking in the luminous sky, the traffic plying the river or the slight river haze rendering indistinct the buildings on the far bank.

When her dark eyes rested upon the graceful arches of Waterloo Bridge in the middle distance, they took on a preoccupied look and her mind zoomed back to the distant past. Her generous mouth broke into an ironical smile. How much water must have flowed beneath that bridge since her last visit, she thought. She had been right to stay away. London contained too many memories, too many ghosts. After more than thirty years they still had the power to unsettle her and to play havoc with her emotions.

No one in her circle of friends quite understood her reluctance to visit London. She had refused all explanation, leaving them to their own surmises. Some had ascribed to her a dislike for the fog and the damp; others an aversion to English

food. Still others put it down to her dismal student days. She allowed them their speculations and kept her own counsel.

Even Pong, before flying back to Hong Kong, chided her by saying: “Ever since I have known you, you have refused to visit London. You did not want to come as part of our honeymoon, you did not want to come to put the children in school and university, you did not want to make it any part of our holidays in Europe. One would have thought the Black Death was still stalking its streets.

“And now, when we finally persuaded you to come for Charity’s graduation, you suddenly want to extend your stay without explanation. If you had told me earlier, I could have re-arranged my schedule. Now I have to leave you on your own. I’ll never understand women.”

“It’ll only be for a week,” she had replied. “I’ll be home soon enough. Don’t worry.”

Standing there beside the Thames, Jasmine pondered again her restlessness over the last three days. Why had she given way so suddenly to the impulse to remain? She had no friends to see, no unfinished shopping to attend to. And yet the urge to remain had been so compelling that she was impatient for Pong to be gone. What was she hoping to experience or discover or achieve? She did not know. If she could not find answer for herself, how could she explain to others?

London, of course, was the most beloved of all the cities she had known. She had gone there at the fervent age of sixteen to enrol at Sadler’s Wells, as the Royal Ballet was then called. For three years it had been an enchanted place where dreams of artistic success, happiness and love had blossomed like flowers. And on a certain unexpected evening, she had also attained that status known as womanhood. But it was the bitter-sweet memories of what happened thereafter that now held her to the city.

For more than three decades she had guarded those memories against all comers, relegating them to the level of the subconscious. But now they were intruding upon her willy-nilly, completely out of control.

Perhaps the old sights and sounds of London were responsible. Charity’s graduation and her departure for a European holiday with her fiancé were also to blame. They suddenly made her realise the best part of her life was over and done with and had left her wondering what it had amounted to.

She had been a dutiful daughter, a faithful wife and a loving mother. Had that been enough to counterbalance the evasions and surrenders pressing so uncomfortably upon her conscience? If so, why that bitter nostalgia for what Arnold called the “youth-time” of her life? If not, then what else must a woman do to find peace?

Ever since she could remember, the only thing she desired was to dance. Soon after the war, when she was nine, her parents had enrolled her for ballet lessons in the belief that ballet was good for a girl's posture.

She soon found she could express herself in a dance in a way she never could with words. Her progress had been so exceptional that Mrs. Rubinovich, her Russian teacher, persuaded her parents to send her to Sadler's Wells for further training.

Mrs. Rubinovich also arranged as her guardian a woman of ancient vintage, Eastern European origins and formidable proportions. But apart from settling her into a boarding-house which suited her modest circumstances and inviting her to an occasional meal, the guardian rarely intruded into her life. She was thus left to fend largely for herself in an alien city which had taken a month by boat to reach.

Her first weeks in London was a period of utter misery. She could not get used to boarding-house food nor the necessity of sharing a communal bathroom. Her fellow boarders were for the most part students but there was not a ballet dancer among them. They were too boisterous to suit her disposition and their horseplay and shrill laughter got on her nerves. She felt utterly wretched until Arnold Beresford made friends with her and introduced her to the endless delights of London.

She had met Arnold by chance, when they both turned up late for dinner at the boarding-house one evening. They were the sole occupants of the dining-room and sat across from each other as plates of cold sausages and mashed potatoes were dumped before them. Then their eyes met and they both burst out laughing at their common misery. From that moment onwards, Arnold assumed the role of guide, advisor and friend.

Arnold was two years her senior and was one of the few non-students living in the boarding-house. He had sandy-coloured hair, ardent blue eyes and a resolute jaw with an attractive cleft at the bottom of his chin. There was an air of purpose about him which set him apart from the other boarders.

He was from Doncaster and was the son of a coal miner. He seemed to have tried his hand at an incredible number of jobs. He had started by delivering milk in a horse-drawn cart. Then, because he developed an interest in horses, he became a stable boy for a year. At the time they met, he was working as a sales assistant at Bennington, that venerable firm which had provided sensible footwear for British gentlefolk for more than a hundred years.

But he indicated his real mission in life was to become a writer and regarded everything he had done or was going to do as a preparation for his chosen calling. His clear ambition and determination to succeed filled her with admiration.

Arnold saw to it that she savoured everything London had to offer. He made a point of showing her the paintings and sculptures by Degas. She took to them

immediately, for they seemed to express the essence of the life she sought. She could easily imagine herself posing for each of the works, in a basic position, exercising at the *barre* or simply lacing up a ballet shoe.

Arnold, as if reading her thoughts, had then said in his low, earnest voice: “You could be better than any of them. You could be a Chinese Pavlova or Ulanova. All you have to do is to want it desperately enough.”

“Oh, I’ve never aimed so high,” she had replied. “I just want to dance. I should be quite happy dancing in an ensemble.”

“You must not short-change yourself. You must have ambition. When you set out to do something you must aim to be the best. There is nothing sadder than to see talent going to waste, since so few of us are really talented. You are talented. You have been endowed with a gift and, as its possessor, you have a duty to perfect it and bring some beauty into this dismal world of ours.”

No one had spoken to her in such a way before. Hitherto, her sheltered existence as the only daughter of a small textile manufacturer had led her to believe that dancing was just a passing indulgence. It was something to be enjoyed before assuming the burdens of adulthood, of helping in the family business, and of finding a husband and raising children.

Arnold’s exposition had given her a fresh point of reference. Thereafter she did her *barre* exercises with heightened enthusiasm, conscious that every perfectly executed pirouette or *entrechat quatre* had the power to brighten the world. That new awareness was the first of many that Arnold was to bring into her life.

Her association with him soon settled into a pattern. From Monday to Saturday, they would have dinner together. After dinner, he invariably retired to his room, to follow a strict regime of reading and writing. He advised her to devise a similar schedule for herself.

Sunday was the day for fun. They would spend it together, wandering around London or visiting nearby places like Greenwich, Windsor and Bath. They would make their plans over dinner during the previous week and their obvious contentment in each other’s company soon caused them to be dubbed “the turtle-doves”.

Such teasing by other boarders drove her to the verge of tears on more than one occasion, for it carried the implication that her relationship with Arnold was less than innocent. Since she was thirteen, her mother had impressed upon her the need for a girl to be chaste and those exhortations had been emphasised more forcefully prior to her departure for England. Her mother kept repeating the lines from the Odes:

“A man may do a wrong, and Time
Will fling its cloak to hide his crime:

A woman who has lost her name
Is doomed to everlasting shame.”

She had often trembled at the thought that her feelings towards Arnold might contain more than friendship. She could neither explain those feelings nor give them a name. All she knew was that she felt comfortable and safe in his company and derived a peculiar pleasure if he so much as allowed her to sew a button or darn a sock for him. When he failed to turn up for dinner, she would become unaccountably lost and she would tingle with curiosity whenever she thought of what he might be doing each evening locked up in his room.

Once she asked to see some of his writing but Arnold replied: “You’ll read them soon enough, when the world is ready for me. But if I don’t make it, why bother with the scribblings of a failure?”

On the contrary, she wanted to share everything with Arnold. It pleased her enormously when Arnold took an interest in different aspects of her development. He would correct her faulty pronunciations or her wrong usage of idioms. He would recommend books for her to read, music for her to enjoy and ideas for her to ponder. He took particular interest in her progress as a dancer and sometimes asked her to improvise outrageous dances like “a radio suffering from static interference” or “the metamorphosis of a character out of Kafka or Dostoevsky”.

“Dancing is more than just mastering sets of steps. Every mother’s child knows how to dance like sylphs or dying swans,” he once told her. “For it to become real art you need to find a unique way of expressing what people have been struggling to express. Nothing else is worth a damn.”

In order to live up to his expectations, she redoubled her efforts to perfect her dancing. Then, one day, he suddenly began addressing her as “Dancer” and she knew her progress had met with his approval.

Jasmine smiled to herself in recalling those days. Wonderful things never seemed to last, she thought. One day you were young and innocent and in no time at all you were old. It was so unfair.

She turned away from the river and crossed over to the small park on the other side of the road. She walked the length of the park and back again. When she came to an unoccupied bench in the shade, she sat down and felt refreshed by the subtle coolness of the shade.

Trying to re-live the past was a stupid exercise, she told herself. If she continued on her present tack, she would find nothing but memories of pain, of lost opportunities, of surrenders and regrets. Yet, somehow, she knew she had to press on, to confront her past and come to terms with it. If purging the past was necessary, what better place was there than the very city where the most traumatic events took place?

Jasmine took herself back again to her final year at Sadler's Wells. She remembered how attached to Arnold she had become by that time. It seemed that so long as she could dance and enjoy his company that would be the acme of happiness.

She recalled her apprehension on the approach of graduation. Unless a miracle happened, that would mean the end of her stay in London. That prospect filled her with desperation. She knew it was possible for students doing well to enter the school's ballet company after graduation. Without so much as pausing for thought, she applied for a position.

"You've done very well, my dear, and I'm exceptionally pleased with your progress," her teacher said. "You're a superb little dancer but I'm afraid it's going to be difficult to find you a place."

"Am I not as good as the others?" Jasmine asked.

"Oh, no, no! Quite the contrary. You're better than most. But you see, my dear, it is not only dancing that counts. You also have to fit in."

"I don't understand."

"Well, my dear, try to imagine yourself in an ensemble or a chorus. Can't you see that you will not blend well? You're smaller than the other girls. And then there's your Asiatic face. One dark face among all those pale ones. It just won't work, don't you see?"

"I only want to continue dancing."

"Why not go home and join one of the companies there?"

"There are no ballet companies in Hong Kong."

"Well, there's your chance to start one."

She had returned to the boarding-house devastated. When she recounted the episode to Arnold amidst a flood of tears, he was indignant.

"What do those old fogeys know?" Arnold demanded. "That's the trouble with us British. We cling to a constipated life. We stick with what our grandfathers are accustomed to. We don't realise the world's changing. Hell! In America all kinds of new dance forms are evolving. Size and colour don't matter two hoots. Don't worry, we can shake the dust off this place. We'll go to New York and show the world what can be done."

That evening, because of her distress, Arnold allowed her into his room. And as he comforted her, the inevitable happened. Arnold declared his love, causing all the pent-up affection she felt for him to burst forth. She forgot about her mother's admonitions, about the *Odes*, and surrendered herself.

Thereafter, staying at the boarding-house and sneaking into each other's room became intolerable. Arnold urged her to move into a place of their own. But she was hesitant.

“Look, this is the youth-time of our lives,” Arnold argued. “It is a time for following the dictates of our hearts. Life will force us into retreats and surrenders soon enough. But in the youth-time of our lives we can defy the world and make of life what we will.”

Shortly thereafter, they moved into a small flat and the two or three months that followed were the happiest in her life.

But news had a way of travelling thousands of miles, especially when one did not particularly want it to spread. Before she knew it her father was in London, demanding that she pack her bags for home. Those terrible three-cornered scenes, with the two men she loved shouting incomprehensibly at each other, remained as vividly as if they had happened yesterday. No effort by her could soften the sharp edges in their exchanges.

“Have you no shame?” her father demanded, in a voice filled with both sorrow and anger. “How can you take up with a common salesman?”

“He’s not a salesman, Father,” she tried to explain through her tears. “He aims to be a writer. He’s still trying to learn about life.”

“Then let him learn with someone else’s daughter! Your mother has been sick with worrying since she heard what you’ve been up to.”

“I’m sorry Mother had to learn of it this way. But we love each other.”

“Love? What do you know about love? You’re just in your teens.”

“What’s going on?” Arnold interjected, catching the anger and frustration in the voices. “Tell him we want to get married.”

After she had interpreted, her father replied: “You think marriage will solve everything? How will you live? You’re our only child. Are you going to remain ten thousand miles away? What would be the difference then between having a child and having none?”

“We could come to live in Hong Kong,” she suggested, desperately.

“And what would this man do in Hong Kong? Sell shoes? He does not speak our language. He does not know our customs. He may not even like our food. Will he just sit there when relatives gather on festive days? And when you have children, am I supposed to take them to the park and explain to all and sundry why my grandchildren have blue eyes and fair hair? If you have any consideration at all for your mother or for myself, you will pack your things this instant.”

As her tears tumbled down in torrents, Arnold kept demanding: “What’s he saying? What’s he saying?”

She avoided interpreting the worst of her father’s outburst and simply said: “I have to go home. My mother is sick and is asking for me. I owe her the duty to go back.”

“I’m sorry to learn of your mother’s illness,” Arnold said. “But let us get married first. Then we can both go to see her.”

“No, you don’t understand. I am Chinese. Chinese girls have to get their parents’ permission before getting married. My father is upset now. But when I get home I can explain things to him and to my mother. Please be patient and trust me. I will come back to you very soon.”

“How soon?”

“A few months. A year at the most.”

“No! If you leave I know I’ll lose you. I love you and don’t want to lose you. Can’t you see we have our own lives to live? We can’t be governed by what parents want. Confucius has been dead for twenty-four centuries. It’s time we buried him. Let us just go and get married. Things can sort themselves out afterwards.”

“That’s impossible. You just don’t understand.”

“Yes, I *do* understand! I understand better than you. Listen to me, Dancer. What you decide today will seal both our fates forever. So listen very carefully. Your parents mean well but they cannot live your life for you. Only you can do that. You must know that you if go back, your parents will never let you return here. And I haven’t got the money to come to you. It will mean the end of both your dancing and our love.

“Don’t you realise what we are both facing today? It is our Rubicon, our river of no return. You see, there is something very peculiar about rivers. A river never remains the same because fresh waters are flowing into it all the time. Therefore no one can cross the same river twice. We are now on the edge of our special river. We either cross it together or we lose it forever.

“If we fail to cross, then that something which makes you want to dance and makes me want to write will die. If that happens, then we might as well be dead too. We may go on breathing and eating and talking, but for all intents and purposes we will be dead. So let’s cross our river together now.”

“I can’t! I can’t!” she wailed.

Jasmine looked up at the sunlight filtering through the tracery of leaves and suddenly realised that she had been crying. She took out a handkerchief of fine Irish linen and dabbed her eyes.

Yes, Arnold had been right, she thought. Something died that day and everything thereafter turned colourless and flat. She wrote numerous letters to declare her love and to plead for patience but Arnold never replied. After more than a year she stopped writing.

Then relatives introduced her to Pong, an architect at the start of his career. Pong never enthused about any mission in life the way Arnold did. He just had

a knack for designing buildings which maximised plot ratios and squeezed out every last bit of useable space. Developers loved him. She eventually married him for want of anything better to do. Although Pong provided her with all the luxuries she could possibly want, their years of marriage passed like grey shadows, one indistinguishable from another.

Now her parents were dead and her children had grown up. Her son had become an architect and had acquired his father's designing talents. Charity had just graduated from the University of Manchester with a dentistry degree. She would happily spend the rest of her days straightening teeth and filling cavities. It was strange that both her children had opted for careers that were safe and practical. They would never be troubled by yearnings of the spirit or lose sleep over intractable human issues.

Jasmine speculated momentarily whether she would have made anything of her dancing if she had gone to New York with Arnold. She had a failure of nerves at the crucial time and now she would never know.

But what of Arnold? Did he remain true to his destiny or did his divine spark die as well? If he had carried on writing she would feel less guilty about her own failure. Through the years she had kept an eye out for books bearing his name but found none. She comforted herself with the thought he might have used a pseudonym.

All of a sudden she felt an overwhelming need to know. She realised at once that was the real purpose of her extended stay. But how could one go about locating someone after more than thirty years? Well, Bennington had been in existence for over a hundred years and that was as good a place as any to start. So thinking, she got up from the bench to make her way back to the Savoy.

It took her half an hour of telephoning to discover that old staff records were kept at Bennington's headquarters in Birmingham. Several calls later she got through to the Personnel Manager.

"I'm terribly sorry to trouble you," Jasmine told the woman at the other end of the line, "but I'm wondering if you could help me with a personal matter. I'm from abroad and I'm anxious to locate an old friend who used to work for Bennington thirty years ago. I know this is a long shot but I thought you might have a forwarding address or something to help me pick up the trail."

"We do keep records for a fair while but thirty years in a very long time. I'll see what I can do. What is your friend's name and where did he work?"

"When I knew him he was a sales clerk at the Piccadilly branch of Bennington. His name was Arnold Beresford."

"Oh, goodness gracious me!" the voice at the other end exclaimed with a laugh. "Mr. Beresford is still with us! He's now our Sales Director. I'm sure he will

be delighted to hear from an old friend. Unfortunately, he's out of the country at the moment. Summer vacation, you know. He'll be back in a fortnight. If you would leave a message I'll see that Mr. Beresford gets it."

An image of Arnold flashed across Jasmine's mind. It was an image of a stout, greying businessman with a gold watch chain strung across his waistcoat, leaving a house in suburbia to catch the 8.15, absorbed with the weekly sales figures and the schedule for the stores promotion. Her heart felt like a stone within her breast.

"No, there's no message," Jasmine said to the telephone. "Now that I know where he is I can get hold of him when he returns. Thank you very much."

Jasmine heard the receiver being replaced at the other end. She lowered her own instrument onto her lap and sat holding the dead telephone for a very long time.

Lost River has appeared in **Discovery** magazine in Hong Kong and **Short Story International** in the United States. It has also been broadcast by BBC Radio 4 in the United Kingdom.