

## BALLERINA

Only those of a jealous nature would have disputed Elizabeth Cowling's beauty and few in her company could fail to be delighted by her charm and humour.

Paul Stewart was most definitely handsome, some would venture to say visibly perfect but, the qualities that endeared him to others, exclusive of his good looks, were skilfully affected.

The patience, wit and affability he exuded were carefully calculated and performed to gain favour for personal benefit and sinisterly veiled a naturally jealous and spiteful disposition.

Paul's fine features appealed greatly to Elizabeth's aesthetic mind, so much so that her usual perceptiveness was disabled and she failed to detect what should have been warning of Paul's cruel deception.

Ignoring advice. Elizabeth Cowling married Paul Stewart and after four years, to them a son, Timothy, was born.

Several years later Elizabeth inherited a vast sum of money. A legacy that Paul never alluded to prior to their marriage, for Mr. Stewart was a master of the lie and deceit, and Elizabeth never suspected that her husband was privy to the details of her inheritance before he had ever met her.

A meeting that was effected with elaborate guile as soon as details of the unsuspecting woman's future good fortune was made knowledge to the handsome devil.

Gambling. womanising, personal extravagance in clothes and jewellery, in fact all the familiar seductions that satiate a weak man's craving, carefully conspired over the years to dissipate what was once a family fortune.

Paul's frequent absence from home, the neglect of his beautiful wife, preferring the sexual favours and attention bestowed upon him by others, all passed unchallenged as Elizabeth devoted more and more time to her beloved son, Timothy.

Genetically Timothy had been blessed, for the caprices of nature had not stirred to disrupt the most favourable distribution of genes that gave him his father's looks and his mother's nature but despite such perfect combination he was painfully shy when approached by female admirers.

His shyness was compounded by Elizabeth's fervour as she discouraged aspiring girlfriends and it was to this ardent opposition that we must ascribe Timothy's subsequent, and unfortunate, pitiful stammer.

He became more introverted as a result and increasingly sought his mother's company and love, that unique maternal love, comforting without price or criticism.

A love so powerful that, if greedily imbibed it can distort and suffocate when freely given in excess or, leave one destitute when it is lost or withdrawn.

Such feeling of destitution fell upon Timothy as swiftly as the pneumonia that took Elizabeth from him, and at the tender age of seventeen Timothy was left, not only to the mercies of a world from which, hitherto he had been spared by his mother's misguided protection but, more daunting than that, faced the prospect of life alone with his father. A father whose liver was partially rotted by

alcohol, whose brain was being assailed by syphilis and who no longer had the ability or inclination to suppress the dark side of his personality.

Paul would often condemn his son, in his drunken outbursts disparaging him for sharing his mother's love for the arts, unjustifiably blaming him for her premature death.

The familiar tongue of alcohol, or those words of bitter regret spoken with passion and courage but no legitimacy whatsoever. The hallmark of an address delivered at the emptying of a bottle, or the twilight of a wasted life.

Paul lingered on for five years. His outbursts became outrageous, pathetic, and strangely Timothy's feelings were gradually shifting, commensurate with his father's decline, from that of antipathy to compassion as he recognised and acknowledged he had never really loved his father or in fact been able to warm to or approach, that powerful dominant figure who once stole his mother's heart.

In accordance with his wishes, Timothy nursed his dying father at home end, significantly, Paul's last gesture in this life was not of defiance or anger, but love, simply holding his son's hand and lightly squeezing it as, ironically, in parting they were united.

In the years that followed his father's death Timothy became more reclusive, living in the family home on a trust set aside for him by his mother, and supplementing these funds by restoring art, work for reputable dealers.

His life's passion and the one thing sure to entice him from the sanctuary of home, was the ballet.

He loved the grace and beauty of ballet, especially the poise and elegance of the prima ballerina who liberated his emotions, freed his inhibitions, as he sat enraptured by their performances and was led from the consciousness of reality by the fairy tale spectacle he beheld.

One such artiste with the ability to do this was Monique Lazar, a French ballerina who appeared to defy gravity as her perfect physique seemed to float on the music that rose from the orchestra.

For Timothy, Monique was the personification of excellence. A child from the marriage of beauty and artistry and for that reason he never missed her Royal Opera House appearances but, for her last London performance a replacement had been engaged, as an accident or illness, shrouded in mystery, had befallen Monique.

The public demanded to know the reason for her absence and if indeed she would ever appear again but the word "indisposed" was the only response to such demands, adding credulity to the rumour that her career had ended.

Despite his adulation of Monique, Timothy felt helpless, and haplessly resigned to the awful prospect that he may never see her perform again

It was a Friday afternoon and Timothy had completed the restoration of an oil on canvas and hired a hackney carriage to travel from his home in Bloomsbury to the shop in Victoria where the proprietor, Mrs. Toller, was expecting him.

She took the wraps from the painting and effusively complimented Timothy on his work which embarrassed him greatly, as did receiving the envelope containing payment for his professional services.

His embarrassment precipitated a move to the door, all the while he thanked her and offered her best wishes and was about to make an exit when suddenly he saw an object that entirely distracted him and his hand unconsciously slipped from the shop's brass door handle.

The object was a beautiful Chinese lacquered jewellery box in colours as black as a raven and red, as startling as blood.

Timothy moved to the box and gently raised its lid which set in motion the fine mechanical movement, producing the melody of Swan Lake.

The small spring rotated slowly in front of the mirror held in the recess of the box's lid but there was no ballerina surmounted on the spring.

The strains of Swan Lake mesmerised Timothy and Mrs. Toller's words were lost to his reverie. 'The little ballerina is in the corner of the box. She needs fixing, she came off of the spring somehow, I don't think it's a big job....'

Timothy had carefully taken the miniature doll from the box and was cradling her in the palm of his hand as his imagination transported her to the magic of Covent Garden. Mrs. Toiler respectfully cut short her conversation as she recognised Timothy's muse and soon the only sounds were those of Swan Lake emanating from the small lacquered box, and the rattle of horse-drawn traffic, subdued by the shops heavy door and window.

A purchase price on the jewellery box was agreed and within an hour Timothy was in his workshop restoring the ballerina to her rightful place at the tip of her small silver spring that would stand erect and rotate as soon as the lacquered lid was opened.

He wound the mechanism and watched the little figure begin to turn majestically when, for no apparent reason, the music stopped and she was at once motionless.

Timothy was puzzled, but not unduly perturbed as he raised the box and by means of a small key set in its base, gave the mechanism several turns, which unfortunately failed to produce sound or motion.

He put on his close-work spectacles and carefully examined the delicate pin and roller movement but all was in perfect order.

Gently setting the small screwdriver on his desk. Timothy leaned back into the embrace of his chair and waited for inspiration to rescue him from the failure of science.

After some little while, under the influence of inspiration, he removed the ballerina and watched her pedestal rotate to the music.

He returned her to her position and peered closely as she began to pirouette when, once again, the music stopped and prematurely she was motionless.

Timothy smiled as he considered his illogical solution to the mystery but upon closer scrutiny his smile grew broader as his unlikely theory was steadily proven.

There was a deep ugly scratch upon her face that would be clearly visible were she to turn sufficiently to glimpse her image in the small mirror set in the lid, and so at each rotation she would stop before her distressing blemish was made plain to her, in reflection.

With a tiny sable brush and infinite patience, Timothy concealed her nasty injury and at last she was restored to total perfection. Soon the music played as she elegantly turned at the tip of her silver toes and the mirror reflected her in her former glory.

The months passed, the seasons changed and as is often the case, the box, once an object of acquisition, languished on display with other assorted objets d'art .....

Timothy gazed abstractedly beyond his window at the fragile leaves that left their branches to elope with an autumn wind and gather in piles of red and gold in his garden.

His attention returned to the daily paper, in particular the news item that had caused him to look away in disbelief.

*Monique Lazar to appear at Covent Garden.* He read on to discover, that not only was the prima ballerina going to appear at the Royal Opera House but that tickets would be on sale that very morning.

In panic he fled and when, eventually he arrived home, in possession of a ticket for Lazar's first night performance, he smiled at the breakfast table disarray which bore testimony to the mood of hysteria and excitement in which he had left.

Such a mood visited him regularly in the weeks preceding Monique's performance and he had never felt quite such a level of agitated anticipation before.

For Timothy and the rest of the house, reality had obviously exceeded expectation, as they stood unanimously applauding Monique Lazar's triumphant return and tears welled in their eyes that were the emotion of ovation.

Beyond the splendour and elegance of the theatre, rain indiscriminately fell with spiteful ferocity upon the poor and glamorous alike, leaving only a handful of devoted souls to brave the elements and dwell at the stage door.

An hour passed and Monique had still not emerged, giving credence to the rumour that she had left much earlier, through the main doors.

The appalling weather encouraged belief in the speculation of Monique's departure and soon only Timothy remained at the artistes' entrance.

Then, just as he resolved to leave, he heard female laughter, followed by the theatre's light and warmth as it escaped in the folds and flesh of the departing Lazar and her friends.

Monique and Timothy suddenly came face to face and they mirrored each other's puzzled expression of pleasure.

"Who is this shy but handsome man? Why do I feel I know him and why am I so strangely drawn to him, a perfect stranger to me?"

"She is beautiful, but much more than beauty there is warmth and humour and, Oh! so many things"

Monique took the programme Timothy unconsciously held and she hurriedly but deliberately wrote something inside before returning it to him. Not a word was spoken, as if they did not wish to break the spell of magical silence cast by that magnificent chemistry of instant affinity.

The stillness was eventually broken as Monique's friends called her to the waiting cab they had hailed but, briefly she lingered, just long enough to convey her feelings, smiling as their hands lightly touched when Timothy accepted his programme.

"Monique, Monique" her friends called and Timothy almost involuntarily reached out to restrain her but actually his only protest was to open his mouth slightly, as if to speak.

As she turned to leave, he saw in the flickering gas light a scar upon her face.

A thin line of new flesh, scar tissue, ran from her left eyebrow to just below the cheek bone and although both make-up and surgery had been skilfully employed, the glass fronted display cabinet that had shattered in her home, would faintly leave its mark upon her, forever.

At home Timothy took off his soaking clothes, made tea and prepared to savour, by the fireside, the memory of a day that had given him as much pleasure as those he once shared with his mother.

As Timothy opened his programme, something fell from its pages and came to rest in his lap. It was a card with an address and signature hastily scribbled on it.

*'18 Cumberland Terrace, Regents Park.  
Monique'*

At once her smiling image came to mind and, looking beyond the small card he held between his fingers, in the flames he re-lived her wondrous performance before memory bowed to imagination and he saw himself and Monique walking arm in arm, felt the warmth of her embrace, the softness of her skin but, most of all, knew the pleasure of her company.

Those bold fantasies were soon dispelled as his natural shyness returned and it was to that shyness he ascribed the perspiration at his brow, ignorant as he was of the pernicious illness breaching his immune system. Timothy resolved to call at Cumberland Terrace within the time that good manners dictates and meanwhile enjoy the warm glow or expectation.

Such pleasant resolution temporarily banished the sickness he had felt and wrongly diagnosed, however, in the morning Timothy felt so unwell it was clear his malaise was physical rather than emotional.

He took lemon tea with honey and decided to stay in bed to assist the powers of homoeopathy but naturally such remedy proved ineffectual, his condition deteriorated and what began as a chill, caught in the autumn rain, steadily worsened to something far more sinister.

For three days and nights he slipped in and out of consciousness and on the fourth morning, in one of those passing moments that punctuate delirium with lucidity, he struggled from his bed. determined to call on Monique.

Timothy stepped into the street, unaware of his dreadful personal appearance and when eventually, after a long shambling detour, he miraculously arrived at Regents Park, the housemaid's response to his call was hardly surprising.

He was dishevelled, unshaven, incoherent, and therefore curtly, but mistakenly dispatched, in the manner reserved for all unwanted admirers obviously emboldened by alcohol, to call.

Sickness and fatigue dissolved Timothy's natural perception and so, misinterpreting the rebuff as personal rather than general, crestfallen, he staggered home to Bloomsbury.

It is widely accepted that a broken heart is less likely to vanquish serious illness than one that beats in love, and Timothy's proved no exception as he grew weaker by the day, barely surviving each crisis until, at last, he slipped peacefully from this life.

Some years later Monique Lazar retired from international ballet and returned to her beloved village of Bormes, Southern France, to spend the remainder of her life in what she hoped would be perfect retirement.

Miss Lazar never married or ever ceased wondering, of the handsome, diffident young man, whose programme she had signed at the stage door of the Royal Opera House, and who had captured her heart with his presence rather than words.