

## THE KING'S RIVER PARTY

An Original Story to Accompany Handel's Water Music

With Dance/Movement

By Sonia Levitin

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### I.

Long ago in the city of London, lived a king who loved to give parties. In the winter he held dances at the palace. In fall there were rides in the country. In spring he gave grand picnics on the lawn. Now it was summer, and the king yearned to give a splendid party. What would it be?

The king summoned his courtiers, ladies and gentlemen who served him. They talked for a long time. None of their suggestions pleased the king. At last the youngest courtier, a handsome and fine youth called Sir Geoffrey, spoke out. He said, "Your Highness could give a river party."

"How so?" asked the king.

"We could have a party on the River Thames," said Sir Geoffrey.

"Which flows through London Town," added Lady Geraldine, his sister, and one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting.

"Splendid!" cried the king. "Listen, everyone! What a wonderful idea! We will have a party upon the Thames River, which flows through London Town." The king whispered to Sir Geoffrey. "How does one have a party upon the river, do you suppose?"

Sir Geoffrey replied, "On a barge, Your Highness, and river boats in attendance."

His sister, Lady Geraldine added, "Boats will carry the guests down the river."

So it was decided. The king would give a party on the River Thames. Large, flat boats called barges would carry the guests, grand ladies and gentlemen of the realm, upon the river. And there, in the sweet cool of the afternoon, they would sing and dance and be merry. Jugglers and mimes and trained dogs would perform. The

best cooks and bakers in the realm would prepare the most wonderful feast. Best of all, musicians with horns and flutes, violins and drums, would play beautiful music. Graceful dancers would entertain the king and his guests.

For miles around people wondered. Who will be invited? Will it be me?

Excitement swept across the entire city and out over the countryside. Everyone wanted to attend the king's party on the River Thames.

Of course, ordinary people do not attend royal parties—unless they are very lucky. Or very clever. Or have many important friends.

## II.

In the oldest part of London, where the streets were narrow and the houses black with soot, lived a lad and his sister, quite poor in the things that money buys, but rich with love for each other. The young man's name was Henry. His sister's name was Alexis. They were twins.

They had been raised by a kind step mother, now dead, who cared for them as best she could, leaving them but a single treasure which she had gotten from her father in turn. It was a long, polished, silver flute.

Henry loved to play the flute, which he learned to do with great skill and beauty. Alexis, inspired by her brother's music, taught herself to dance. Now and then, in a rare hour of leisure, the brother and sister played and danced together, and at those moments they knew great joy.

But pleasant times were few for Alexis and Henry. They worked hard to earn their meager meals. Henry swept the street with a little straw broom. Alexis scrubbed the big black pots from the Inn across the way. Life was very, very hard.

## III.

The king's messengers traveled by horse drawn coaches across the city to deliver invitations to the party.

People saw the messengers dressed in splendid clothes. They heard the ringing of trumpets and the shouts of news. The fortunate few who received invitations laughed out loud with delight. Ladies and gentlemen rushed to the tailors, the hatters, the shoemakers, the jewelers, to prepare themselves for the magnificent party. They crowded the streets, shoving and pushing other people out of the way. Henry, sweeping with his little straw broom, saw them.

They came to the Inn, puffed with pride. They shouted and banged their glasses, boasting about their good fortune. Alexis, scrubbing the black pots in the kitchen, heard them, and she tried not to care, but she felt poorer and sadder than ever.

Neither Henry nor Alexis said a word to each other about the party. What was the use of wishing for the impossible? But they couldn't help dreaming.

Night after night, oh, how they dreamed!

Henry dreamed of going to the party, for there he would hear the finest musicians in the land.

Alexis dreamed of going to the party, for there she would see the best dancers in the land.

Henry saw Alexis's longing. It shone in her eyes.

Alexis saw Henry's desire. It showed in his every movement.

Soon Alexis forgot her own longing but thought only of Henry and how wonderful it would be for him to hear the fine musicians at the king's party on the river! It was the chance of a lifetime.

Henry forgot his own desire, but thought only of Alexis, how wonderful it would be for her to see the dancers at the king's party on the river! It was the chance of a lifetime.

#### IV.

All the invitations were out. Grand ladies and gentlemen paraded about in their finery with no thought for the poor who could never match their splendor. They made impossible demands upon the shopkeepers, the jewelers, the tailors, the grooms, the valets, the coach drivers.

Their rude voices rang out along the streets.

"Make me seventeen satin petticoats, embroidered with golden threads. Next week, you say? No! No! I want them today!"

"You must braid my horse's mane into a hundred plaits. His hooves must shine like ebony. What? You refuse me? You're fired!"

"I want diamonds sewn into my gloves, and rubies in my slippers. What? No rubies? I shall have a tantrum immediately!"

Even sisters and brothers fought with one another.

"That's my velvet cloak. How dare you touch it!"

"You look like a hag in that hood, my dear. Better give it to me."

"You must lend me your fur shawl, or I shall lock you in the closet and throw away the key!"

All over London one heard the sounds of arrogance and selfishness and boasting.

Of course, the king did not know this. Who would tell him? Besides, he was busy planning his wonderful party. He stood on his balcony and watched the endless parade of the lucky ones, the happy ones, the chosen few.

V.

Day followed day. Night followed night. And the longing in Alexis's heart increased. She became pale with grief. She did not eat. All night she sighed and all night she dreamed. She must find a way to send Henry to the party.

Henry tried to cheer his sister. He sang for her. He played bright tunes to make her dance. But Alexis only nodded sadly, and when the music became too beautiful, she wept.

While he played, Henry grew sadder and sadder to see his sister's despair. He must find a way to send her to the party.

VI.

At last Henry had an idea. A wonderful idea!

The very next morning he set out to speak to the inn keeper. Now, the inn was very large, with a hundred rooms and ten salons and its own bakery, the largest in the land. It was not honest work that had made the inn keeper rich, but treachery and deceit.

The inn keeper made Henry wait. Delicious smells of freshly baked breads and cakes made Henry swoon with hunger. But the inn keeper offered him nothing to eat and nothing to drink.

Still Henry waited. At last the inn keeper stood before him. "Well," he demanded, "what is it, boy?"

"Oh, kind and generous sir," said Henry, "I come to you with a proposition." Henry held his hat in his hand. "If you would only let my sister Alexis carry the cake to the king's feast, I shall do anything you ask!"

The innkeeper narrowed his eyes. He pulled at his moustache. "Very well," said he. "Your sister may carry the cake to the king's feast. But in return, you must work for me each night from dark to dawn, sweeping out my stables and grooming the horses for a whole year, and without pay."

"Agreed!" said Henry eagerly.

Said the inn keeper, "I am a gentle person, and I will grant your wish. However, you must also agree to three conditions."

"Anything!" cried Henry.

"I must be certain that your rude sister will not embarrass me in any way. We will instruct her as follows. She must swear not to speak a single word while she is in the king's presence."

"It shall be as you demand," said Henry humbly.

"Furthermore," said the inn keeper, "while your sister is on the river boat, she must not touch anything."

"It shall be as you say," said Henry.

“Lastly,” said the innkeeper, “Your sister must in no instance gaze upon His Highness, the king. Do you understand?”

“Certainly, my lord,” said Henry. It shall all be exactly as you say. And thank you, thank you, thank you!”

## VII.

Meanwhile, Alexis worked in the back room of the inn, scrubbing the pots. She formed a plan of her own. She begged to see the inn keeper.

“What is it!” he shouted. “I pay you to work, not to stand around talking!”

“Please, sir,” Alexis begged, “I have but one favor to ask of you. My brother would love to go to the king’s party and hear the musicians play. I shall do anything you say if you would let my brother carry the bread to the king’s feast.”

The innkeeper’s mouth watered with greed. His mouth twitched. “Very well,” he said. “Your brother may carry the bread to the king’s feast. In return you must work for me from dark to dawn, scrubbing the ovens in the kitchen and tending the fires for a whole year, and without pay.”

“Agreed!” cried Alexis.

The inn keeper said harshly, “I must be certain that this common boy who is your brother will not embarrass me in any way. He must swear not to speak a word while he is in the king’s presence.”

“It shall be as you say,” said Alexis.

“Also,” said the inn keeper, “your brother must swear to touch nothing while he is on the river boat.”

“Yes, yes!” Alexis promised.

“Lastly,” said the inn keeper, “your brother must under no circumstances dare to gaze upon the king.”

”Agreed!” said Alexis. “Agreed! Agreed!” And she danced with happiness.

## VIII.

Preparations for the party continued. Sir Geoffrey, the youngest courtier, set out in a horse drawn coach to find the best jugglers and mimes, singers and dancers and musicians in the land.

Late one night, as his coach rumbled through the poorest part of London town, Sir Geoffrey heard the most beautiful, delicate music.

In a narrow alley on a dismal street, dressed in poor rags, he saw a young woman dancing, dancing as lightly as a fawn. Her thin dress shimmered like gossamer. Her dancing feet twinkled like moonlight on the water.

Sir Geoffrey saw the young musician sitting on a woodpile, his rags all but invisible. The music rang as sweetly as a chorus of angels.

Enchanted, Sir Geoffrey leapt down from the coach. He did not realize that his sword flashed sharply in the moonlight. He shouted, "Wait! Stop! Stop in the name of the king!"

In that instant Sir Geoffrey saw terror in the eyes of the two young people. They fled, hand in hand, and were soon lost amid the bins and rubble of the poorest part of London Town.

## IX.

All night Sir Geoffrey searched for the young musician and the dancer. He cursed himself for having frightened them. How could he have been so stupid?

If only he could find them again, he would surely ask them to perform at the king's party on the river. What a wonderful musician! What a beautiful dancer! The king could ask for none better.

All day Sir Geoffrey continued to search for the two. He asked everyone he saw. "Have you seen a young man who plays the flute like an angel? Have you seen a young woman who dances as lightly as a fawn?"

"No, no," everyone said.

Sadly the courtier went on. Once he happened to see a ragged fellow sweeping the streets. He shook his head at the poor boy's labor and said nothing.

Sir Geoffrey went by the inn, and he caught a glimpse of a ragged, tired young girl bent over the huge black sink scrubbing pots. Sir Geoffrey sighed at the drudgery and continued. Weary and disappointed, he rode back to the palace.

## X.

The day of the party dawned with great fanfare! The sun rose high in the sky. The air was clear. Birds sang in the trees. The river boats were freshly painted. Bright flags hung from the prows. Red carpet paved the way for the ladies and gentlemen as they came to the king's party.

The jesters, dressed in green, wore bells on their toes.

The mimes, in scarlet clothes, wore glitter in their hair.

Dancers twirled their silken scarves and swayed in their skirts of many colors. The musicians came, with gold braid on their shoulders and bright gold buttons on their coats.

Acrobats in sequin suits and snow white gloves did hand springs on the river bank.

## XI.

Then came all the beautiful people. Ladies with magnificent high-plumed hats. Gentlemen in mirror-polished black boots. Fur capes, feather shawls, silken shirts, satin skirts, velvet coats with taffeta sleeves, braided jackets and collars of lace—the splendid people came, drifting in clouds of perfume, rose and lilac, gardenia and lily-of-the-valley.

All in a row came the serving folk carrying trays of food.

Roasted duck on wooden trays.

Pheasant under glass.

Glazed fish with seaweed and sassafras.

Delicious cod on a chicory bed.

Stuffed eggs and curried mangoes.

Olives in cream and mushroom caps.

Dainty tomatoes, curly greens, mountains of caviar and pineapple-pistachio mousse.

The breads were warm and crusty, smooth and white, filled with rosemary, baked with rye and sesame and glaze. Henry carried a big brass platter with twenty-four loaves. He wore a violet vest borrowed for the occasion.

Behind him, clad in a white gown with ribbons of sky blue velvet, came Alexis. The dress had belonged to her mother, worn for her wedding and packed away in a trunk. Alexis carried a silver tray of succulent cakes, filled with chocolate and almond and cashew cream.

On the shore stood the evil inn keeper, rubbing his hands together. What a fine bargain he had made! Two handsome young people serving his wares, without any pay. Two strong young people would work for him for a whole year! Ah, what a clever fellow he was, he thought, and he watched while the barges moved slowly down the River Thames.

## XII.

Oh, how they feasted! Ah, but some of the guests were rude and greedy indeed.

Lady Monica gobbled up seventeen pieces of gooseberry pie, with seventeen green pickles for dessert. A dozen doves for Lord Jonathan, and he ate them all with his fingers.

The Duchess Caroline burst her buttons, having eaten a tub of potatoes. The Duke of York ate a thirty pound cod, drank a barrel of ale and belched. Count Boris fell asleep with his face in his plate, woke up and ate twenty-nine sparrows. Prince Arlo decided to loosen his tie to help the bread go down. He ate twenty-four rolls with salt and pecans and twenty eight plain, dipped in butter. Princess Jane lost both her shoes and wore two plates on her feet.

Ivan the Count dropped his fork on the floor and ate his peas with a knife.

The Lady Arlene lost her sweet little dog, then found him again in the stew.

Madam Nancy painted her toes. The Duchess Laura picked her nose. Clara the Countess counted her gold, and all this at the table. Yes, at the table! Emma the elder snored in her chair while Erma, her sister, combed her hair. The Earl of Dundee tossed chicken bones overboard, and the noble Sir John wiped his hands on his sleeve.

### XIII.

But Henry and Alexis saw none of this. They saw only the splendor. They heard the music. They smelled the sweet perfume. They were light-headed with joy.

But the king did notice. He wanted his guests and courtiers to be polite. He wanted them to be kind and well mannered. The king was very upset. He decided he would never have parties again.

Meanwhile, Sir Geoffrey, the youngest and handsomest courtier, looked up and saw the most beautiful young woman in the world. She carried a silver tray filled with cakes. She wore a beautiful white dress with sky blue ribbons.

Never before had the young man fallen in love. His body shook. His mouth grew dry. He felt he could not speak. He gazed at Alexis and he thought for a moment that he had seen her once before. How ridiculous, he said to himself. How could it be? How could he know a simple serving girl?

### XIV.

The more Sir Geoffrey gazed at the lovely young woman, the more he knew she had captured his heart.

Suddenly he remembered. She was the girl he had seen that night in the poorest part of town, dancing so beautifully! And the young man beside her, carrying the bread on the tray, was the one who had played his flute!

Love made Sir Geoffrey clever and wise. He had a plan. He went to the king and whispered in his ear.

The king clapped his hands. Trumpets sounded. Drums snapped and rolled. The king was about to make a decree.

“Hear ye, hear ye!” cried the king. “I declare a contest to discover the finest musician and the best dancer among you. All who are able to play or to dance are commanded to participate.”

### XV.

Alexis and Henry looked at each other. They had given their word to the inn keeper that they would not speak. They would not touch anything. They would not gaze upon the king.

Nothing had been said about playing the flute. Nothing had been said about dancing.

“All who play music and all who dance,” shouted the handsome Sir Geoffrey, “in the name of the king, step forth!”

Musicians played and dancers danced, until all were finished, and only Henry and Alexis remained.

Once more Sir Geoffrey called out, “All musicians, all dancers must perform for the king!”

Henry stepped forward. He took his flute from his pocket and held it to his lips.

As Alexis stepped forward, she met the young courtier’s eyes. Never, except for her brother, had she seen a man so handsome, so gentle, so kind. She felt all the wonders of love.

## XVI.

With love and joy in her heart, Alexis danced.

With delight and eagerness, Henry played.

The guests were amazed. The jugglers, the mimes, the court dancers and musicians, all were spellbound by Henry’s playing and Alexis’ dancing. Most enchanted was the king himself.

In all the years of his kingdom, never had he seen such grace and beauty. Never had he heard such sweet and stirring melodies.

When they finished, Henry and Alexis bowed low before the king, keeping their eyes down upon the deck.

“Approach me!” called the king. “Tell me who you are!”

But Alexis and Henry stood mute. They had vowed to the inn keeper that they would not speak.

The king reached into his vest of red velvet and took forth a ruby ring. He said, “As the winners of my contest, you shall be richly rewarded. Take this jewel. It is rare and exceedingly valuable.”

But Henry and Alexis remained motionless. They had sworn not to touch a thing.

At last the king leaned forward and said in a hushed voice, “My dear, beautiful young people. You remain silent and you do not take my reward. At least let me gaze into your eyes.”

But Henry and Alexis kept their eyes downcast. They had sworn not to gaze upon the king. All the ladies and gentlemen, mimes, jugglers, musicians, dancers and servants watched as Henry and Alexis knelt before the king.

## XVII.

At last the king spoke. His voice was more tender than anyone had heard it in many years.

“My good people,” said the king. “Today we have received a great gift. Not only have we watched the most beautiful dancer in the realm and heard the finest musician in the land, but we have witnessed three virtues that seemed long forgotten.”

The king lifted his hands toward the young people who knelt before him. He said, “I asked them to speak, but being modest, they remained silent.”

The people sighed. It was true. Modesty is a great virtue.

The king continued. “I offered them a valuable jewel, but being unselfish, they refused it.”

Everyone murmured. It was true. Unselfishness is a great virtue.

The king continued. “I asked them to gaze at me, but being humble, they looked away.”

Now everyone of the company shouted, “Hurrah! Hail our young heroes!” They clapped and cheered. The court musicians struck up a lively tune.

Sir Geoffrey invited Alexis to dance. Lady Geraldine, the loveliest lady in waiting, danced with Henry. Everyone danced the minuet. They danced the sarabande and the bourree. They danced and danced until the stars came out and the barge arrived at the landing in the heart of London town.

The party was over.

## XVIII.

But the king made one last decree.

“I hereby declare that these two young people shall from now on live in the palace and remain there as long as they wish. For not only do they play and dance divinely, but by their example all the ladies and gentlemen in my court will learn how to be modest, how to be unselfish, how to be humble. It is what I wish,” said the king. “This is what I command.”

And now, released from their vow to the inn keeper by command of the king, Alexis and Henry added their voices to the happy chorus. They joined hands with their new friends. They gazed at the king, their eyes shining with happiness.

And what about the greedy inn keeper?

So astonished was he at seeing Henry and Alexis being honor by the king, that he lost his footing and fell straight into the River Thames and he was never again seen in London Town.

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