

When the Snow Melted

Ba Jin

A spring breeze ruffled my hair; at the foot of the hills a thaw had set in.

It is usually cold when the snow melts, but today the long-hidden sun finally made an appearance. I put on a coat and started down the hill, bathed in sunlight. Few people used that quiet path, though we were not far from the city and the hill was not high. People here kept to themselves; aside from a trip down for their shopping in the mornings, they had little contact with the outside world. I found life up there pleasantly quiet.

Because of my weak nerves, I could not stand the noise and the bustle of city life and had moved up to the hills two months beforehand. Life was regular: I ate and slept at scheduled times and did nothing all day long. I took solitary walks along mountain paths; I also went down sometimes to visit friends. The utterly tranquil and undisturbed life in the hills gradually restored me to health.

My spirits rose too. I felt a joy in my heart, which seemed filled with love, love for the sun, the snow, the wind and the hills, love for everything around me. It was in this mood that I walked down the snow-covered path dotted with black footprints. Further down the footprints mingled and made dirty little puddles. I picked my way over the thickest snow because I loved the crunching of snow underfoot. With the sunlight pouring down and a breeze in my face I felt that balmy spring was coming to meet me.

Halfway down the hill, as I rounded the corner of a villa, a Chinese woman climbing uphill came into view. Recognizing her at once, I stopped to greet her, knowing she was on her way to see me. She walked with her head bent, not looking up until she heard my greeting. Then she hurried over, panting from the climb, her cheeks rosy.

"I can't bear this any longer!" she cried in distress, seizing me by the arm.

One look at her and I knew without asking that she had quarreled with her husband again. I would have to spend quite a bit of time talking her round.

"All right, let's go back to my place," I said, frowning slightly, and we went uphill together.

She said nothing on the way. I could see that she was still angry; flushed and pouting, she kicked the snow as if to vent her irritation. They must have had a real fight this time. They simply couldn't go on like this. Even I could see that the more they quarreled, the wider the gap between them grew. These were not the usual quarrels between husband and wife: they never resorted to fists or to verbal abuse. One of them would generally pull a long face to show that

he or she was upset, or exasperate the other by sulking. On the rare occasions when they had words, one invariably left the room within a few minutes so that the squabble couldn't go on.

I had seen it happen many times. They always came to complain, but not together. I would talk to them until both had calmed down before I sent them home. However, I never found out the cause of their quarrels. They seemed to be quarreling for quarrelling's sake. Yet they were not a bad-tempered couple; both were gentle, good-natured and civilized. For instance, after a quarrel each usually began complaining about the other, but before long he or she would be taking the blame for not being considerate enough. Her eyes always filled with tears when she said this, while he looked most unhappy. Sometimes, meeting at my place after a quarrel, he would take his wife home with much tenderness.

They began to quarrel more and more, as if these scenes repeated themselves. To all appearances it was the same thing happening again. But I was puzzled, for it seemed to me there must be more to this than met the eye. All this could not have happened by accident; there must be a special reason behind it. I wanted to find out what it was.

My study of their temperament shed no light on the matter. She seemed livelier and warmer, while he by comparison was more reserved and serious. Of course this was mere superficial observation.

I had not known the couple very long, but living abroad, and in the country at that, made us fairly close friends. I knew little of their past, only that his father was a not-too-high-ranking official and that both were college students. They had fallen in love and married three years ago but were as yet childless.

It seemed to me there was no real barrier between them. They ought to be getting on very well together. They cared for each other and were comfortably off. Both were studying, he education and she literature, but this was no reason for a clash.

I had never discovered the reason for their quarrels. This time too I found no clue. She kept her lips shut tight, but the grim lines around them faded. By the time we reached my door, she had calmed down.

"What's the matter? Had a fight again?" I asked casually as I took her in and hung up our coats. Nodding, she dropped despondently into a chair and stared dully at the painting on the wall, one hand absently smoothing her hair.

I sat down opposite her. "What about?" I asked, seeing that she remained silent. I kept my eyes on her face giving her no chance to evade the issue.

"What about?" she smiled, obviously trying to hide the pain in her heart. Her eyes rested on me for a second before returning dreamily to the painting on the wall. Leaning back, her head cushioned in her hands, she said half to herself, "To be honest it wasn't about anything in particular. I don't know what to do. I'm afraid we can't go on this way ... Perhaps we ought to separate."

"Separate!" I stole a startled look at her. She was in earnest; her voice held sadness, but no anger. Those words could hardly have been spoken at random. She must have thought about separating for some time.

Separation was of course one way to solve the problem. But things must be pretty serious if such a drastic solution was contemplated. I was worried. To tell the truth I would hate to see this young couple separate, though I didn't like to see them quarrel all the time either.

"Separate?" I knitted my brows and then smiled to ease the tension. "Come, don't get excited. Squabbles between husband and wife are really nothing unusual. If only both sides will compro-

mise a little it's quite easy to settle them amicably. To my mind, you two ought to make an ideal couple." "I used to think so too," she said wistfully. Then she sighed softly and a slight pause ensued before she continued, "But it hasn't worked out that way. Just why, I don't know. At any rate there is a barrier between us."

"Barrier? What barrier?" I asked, as if the idea were quite incongruous.

"I don't know either," she replied in despair. "It's something invisible and intangible, yet I feel it's there ..." She stopped and bit her lips. A look of grief, seemingly faint but in fact profound, clouded her pretty girlish face. And there was anguish in the depth of her eyes. When I saw the expression in them my own heart sank.

"Zisheng, you must find a way out for me!" she begged. "I haven't the courage to go on living with him."

I found myself in a most awkward position. I sympathized with her and was eager to help her – but her husband, Bohe, was my friend. Besides, I could see no good reason why they should split up. I was not ingenious enough to suggest a solution.

"But tell me, do you still love him?" was all I could think of asking after some thought. I only hoped that they would be reconciled.

"Yes, I do," she answered positively after only a little pause. Her face glowed and I knew she was telling the truth. I was delighted, thinking that now the problem would not be difficult to solve.

"Why speak of separation then?" I said bluntly. "If you love him then all's well."

"But he ..." she hesitated.

"He. You mean Bohe doesn't love you? No, that isn't true. There's no other woman," I assured her. We were getting closer to the crux of the matter and I wanted to seize this chance to clear things up. Perhaps I could put an end to the conflict between them.

"I don't know. He used to love me very much but he's changed. Sometimes he's affectionate, at others he's cool. He is often cold on purpose. For instance, this morning I was feeling cheerful and asked him to come and visit you. He not only refused but was annoyed for no reason. He used to do whatever I asked; now he ignores me for hours to read his books, or goes out alone and doesn't come back till late. I can't bear being treated like that ... Maybe it's my bad temper. I know I'm not considerate enough. But all the same ..." Her calm tone showed that she was quite clearheaded and not overwrought. Her voice was quivering with distress, however, and the glow that had lit up her face was gone. There were tears in her eyes, and I could see from her face that she really blamed herself more than her husband.

My heart softened again. Bohe shouldn't torment her like this. Why did he want to make her suffer? Was he no longer in love with her? Yet I had noticed little gestures and looks that revealed his affection for her. He had no close woman friend; there had been no change in their lives. Then what was keeping him from loving her? What was that invisible barrier of which she talked? I longed to know the answer. But I couldn't get it out of her. So I soothed her with the usual platitudes.

"You mustn't take this too seriously, Jingfang. I'm afraid there's some misunderstanding. Bohe isn't that kind of man at all. You know how it is, husband and wife always quarrel over trifles. I'm sure you'll make it up again after a while."

"Zisheng, you don't know how good he used to be, how considerate and loving. He respected and anticipated my every wish. That was why, for love of him, I was willing to leave my family and cross the wide ocean with him. But now ... now I'm sure I have very little place in his heart."

She went on complaining, paying no attention to my arguments. But that was not surprising, seeing I had used them half a dozen times already.

“You don’t know, Zisheng, you just don’t know. I can’t bear to think of the past.” She was growing more agitated, letting her feelings run away with her. Her voice broke and she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

I was feeling more embarrassed every second. I could find no words to comfort her and her distress went to my heart. Red and blue flames were leaping from the fire blazing in the grate. Golden sunlight slanting in through the windows made a bright patch on my desk. I sat half in the sun. But the room’s warm comfort was quite wasted on me. I longed for Bohe’s arrival to rescue me from a difficult position. I knew too that there was every hope of his coming.

Bohe’s tall, spare figure soon appeared outside the window. He walked slowly, his steps heavy. Since we had last met, only two or three days prior, the man seemed moodier than ever.

Having entered, he nodded to me and as was customary removed his coat. Then without a word he walked over to Jingfang. She remained in her seat, her face buried in her handkerchief. She knew he had come but ignored him.

He perched on the arm of her chair, touched her shoulder lovingly, and whispered, “Come home, Jingfang!” She did not answer. He begged her three times, his voice more and more tender, until she muttered an indistinct reply.

“Let’s go home. Don’t let’s stay here to trouble Zisheng. It’s my fault as usual.” He stood up and gently took her arm, bending down at the same time to whisper into her ear.

I could see that I was superfluous and found some excuse to slip out. I don’t know what they said to each other, but by the time I returned he had his arm around her and they were ready to leave. Both were smiling. It was the usual happy ending.

I sent them off with my blessing, thinking now they ought to be able to live in peace for a couple of days.

But that same evening Bohe turned up alone. It was getting late. Outside a wind had risen and unmelted snow lay in drifts against the walls. I had just finished reading a biography and, stirred by the book, was sitting alone staring at the lamp, dreaming of unattainable things. When the doorbell broke the silence, I had already heard Bohe’s footsteps outside. As I went to let him in I wondered uneasily if they had quarreled again.

His face was ruddy from the wind. After taking off his coat he went up to the fire, rubbing his hands vigorously and bending forward to get warm. His face, moody and somber in the firelight, was even darker than the sky before a storm.

My uneasiness mounted. I was eager to know the reason for the stormy look on his face, but at the same time dreaded the revelation. Compressing my lips, I decided to wait, although the suspense was almost unbearable.

He took a few steps round the room before he pounced on me and, seizing my arm in agitation, said, “You must help me, Zisheng!”

I stared at him in amazement. The sheer misery in those dilated eyes boring into my own sent a shiver down my spine.

“What’s the matter? Tell me!” I cried in alarm. The wind kept tapping on the window. A faint rustling in the quiet garden sounded as if someone was walking about and coughing.

“Zisheng, I can’t go on like this. Tell me what I must do! Jingfang and I ...” He let go of my arm and stood there wringing his hands.

Jingfang's name conjured up a vision of the round-faced girl in the light blue tunic and red belt who had wept as she poured out her woes to me that day. My heart warmed to her.

"Sit down and let's talk it over," I patted him on the shoulder and pulled up a chair for him close to the fire. We sat down facing each other. "You shouldn't torment Jingfang like this," I began without waiting to hear more. "She still loves you. Why must you always quarrel with her? Surely you can let her have her way sometimes, can't you? Besides, she's not really difficult to get on with." I spoke earnestly, sure I could move him.

He blinked as I spoke, his mouth working. "You don't understand," he said finally, shaking his head with a look of despair.

"But which of you is more to blame? You don't mean to say it's all her fault?" I countered, annoyed to have my friendly advice cut short this way.

My words must have wounded him, for his face darkened further and he bit his lips.

"It's my fault, of course, I admit that," he replied wretchedly after a pause. "She is not to blame at all." This was unexpected, but I was not displeased to hear it. I hoped by following up this advantage to solve that problem of theirs.

"Then why behave the way you do?" I pursued. "Since you know you're in the wrong, it's up to you to do something about it."

Without the slightest sign of gratitude or gladness, he continued to shake his head and muttered hopelessly, "You still don't understand."

This puzzled me even more. I could not guess what he meant. Outside, the wind was still moaning. The fire was blazing and its leaping flames turned both our faces crimson, but I found him utterly inscrutable.

"I'm tasting the agonies of love," he muttered with a sigh. Suddenly he buried his face in his hands and I knew his mental anguish was beyond all I had suspected. Any clumsy probing into it would be useless.

"Believe me, Zisheng, I am telling the truth," he said at last, raising his head. "I did love Jingfang, I still love her, and I know that she loves me too. But ..." he paused for a moment in painful thought, putting one hand to his temples, and my eyes were caught by the beads of sweat on his forehead.

"But I don't want to love her any more." His hand swept down and he spoke with determination as if love were something he could no longer endure. "Love can be agonizing. She once gave me joy and courage but those days are gone. Now I find that tenderness, that domesticity, unbearable. You see, my outlook has changed ..."

I merely stared at him in bewilderment. I believed he was speaking the truth though.

"I have new convictions. I cannot go on living as before. I want to take a new road completely different from the old one, which means I must abandon my old life." He was absolutely in earnest but I still failed to understand. "However, she is incapable of going forward. She must have love, she must live the way we used to. It's not her fault, and I sometimes think she may be right ... But she makes it difficult for me to give up the old life. She loves me but she can't understand what's in my mind. So she's making me miserable, making me hesitate."

He sighed, and I noticed the tenderness in his voice when he mentioned her. Although he was dissatisfied with her, at the same time he was evidently still in love with her. The whole thing was even stranger than I had thought.

"It would be easier if she didn't love me. But ... as I've told you, I want to abandon my old life, I want to go back to China, I want to ... But do you think she could stand that? Would she let

me live the way I want to? 'Leave her! Leave her!' a voice seems to be whispering all the time ... But ..."

His numerous "buts" confused me even more. However, his lined face and the strange revelations he was pouring out so brokenly enlisted my sympathy. My mental picture of Jingfang began to grow fainter.

"Every day I resolve to leave her and every day I break that resolution. All because of her, because I love her! I've floundered so long in this life of contradictions, I can't stand it any longer. I've thought of deserting her. But I haven't the guts to do it, always because I love her! We quarrel and then, after a time, I can't help but ask her forgiveness. Love has such a tight hold on my heart."

He let out a deep breath and clutched wildly at his chest as if he wanted to tear out the love in his heart.

"I hit on a way at last. I must make her leave me. I made myself deliberately cruel and heartless, quarreling with her for no reason just to make her lose her illusions about me and stop loving me. I want her to hate me ..."

He stopped suddenly and, breathing with difficulty, raised a face dark with misery, unrelieved by a single ray of hope and with something terrible blazing in the depth of the eyes. It was then that I understood the cause of their quarrels, but knowing the secret only put me in an even more difficult position.

"This is how I've been tormenting myself and her, constantly increasing her agony. Everything was clear to me but she was in the dark. Still it was no use; it only made me more wretched. She still loves me, she won't think of leaving me. I've failed. After each quarrel I have to comfort her. She has made me so weak that I simply can't leave her!"

His cries of despair rang weakly through the room, with no other sound to disturb them. Outside, the wind moaned in fits and starts; my room was growing cold too. I went to the fireplace to put on more wood. I did not interrupt him, but I couldn't help wondering why he insisted on getting away from her.

"But we can't go on like this. I must get away from her, make her love someone else, yet I can't. Zisheng, I can't stand this any longer, I can't go on acting. I never thought love would mean such agony. I don't want love! I want nothing more to do with it! ..."

As if at his wit's end he pressed his hands to his heart. Without waiting to hear my opinion, he stood up and went over to the sofa, burying his face in one of its arms.

A fearful silence ensued. As the wind outside died down I could hear the wood in the fireplace sizzle. The air seemed stifling. The pain and horror of Bohe's revelations had shattered my evening's peace. I did not blame him; my heart ached for him, even though I could not see why he wanted to make the woman he loved hate him.

"If what you say is true, Bohe, why do you insist on crushing her love for you? Why must you get away from her? Can't you start living amicably together again? You ought to think things over carefully." That was the advice I finally managed to offer.

He stood up abruptly, his eyes hot and dry. "No, no!" he insisted. "I can't. I want to go back to China. I have more important things to do. This life here is too full of contradictions ..."

Wringing his hands, he took a few steps, then darted over to seize my arm again. "Let me tell you, Zisheng: she's had two abortions but now she's with child again and she won't get rid of it. She absolutely refuses. What am I to do?" His eyes cornered me, demanding an answer.

This came as a sudden, terrible shock to me, reviving all my sympathy for Jingfang and making it even harder to understand him. "She is right, you know," I said, indignant at his heartlessness. "She has a right to have a baby. You can't make her get rid of it."

"But this isn't my fault. We are both victims." My words did not anger him, though he was anxious to justify himself. His voice was softer now, less agitated. "Don't you see I suffer too? Even more than she does. You must realize, Zisheng, that I'm not inhuman. I can't help myself. Don't you see how miserable it's making me? I can't find a single person who'll listen to my troubles! Only you! Jingfang doesn't understand me at all. I can't tell her straight out!" He sighed again and muttered, more to himself than to me, "Now, I've tasted to the full the bitterness of love." He straightened up and stood silently before me, as if to reveal to me all the misery lodged in that tall, spare frame.

His words made me more confused than ever. I too am weak and find it hard to make up my mind. I sided now with Bohe, now with Jingfang. Though I had long wanted to reconcile husband and wife, I was completely at a loss now that Bohe stood in such misery before me asking for help. I wracked my feeble brains for some way out.

After pacing about in silence for a while, he turned toward me suddenly with a strange look on his face. "Tell me honestly, Zisheng, are you fond of Jingfang?" he faltered.

I nodded uncomprehendingly. Yes, I was fond of Jingfang, and ever since Bohe began making her miserable, I had felt a special sympathy for her. His eyes lit up and his clouded face brightened in a way that surprised me until the reason struck me. Then I leapt up as if someone had slapped my face. "How can you think of such a thing?" I raged indignantly. "It's too ridiculous!"

He backed away and smiled sadly. "Why get angry?" he protested. "I really want to know. I'm not suspecting you of anything."

"Get that idea out of your head right now. My advice to you is: Go home and live sensibly with your wife. Stop making yourselves miserable for no reason." I suppressed my own irritation to give him this last piece of advice, wondering if he was going out of his mind.

His face darkened again, that glimmer of light completely gone. He sank dejectedly into a chair and sat for some time with his head in his hands. Then he got up and, with a despairing "I'm going," picked up his coat.

I did not try to stop him, but stood up and followed him silently to the door. A cold wind rushed in as he opened the door and I shivered. The moaning of the wind was all I could hear. Though I wanted to detain him, he had swept out of the room.

I felt sorry about the way I had treated him. He had come to me in great distress seeking help, but I had sent him off burdened with greater unhappiness.

Full of remorse, I went back to the sofa and sat down. Looking up, my eyes fell on the painting that had drawn Jingfang's gaze more than once earlier that day. A well-known picture entitled "Mother and Son," it depicted a well-dressed woman with a two-year-old boy on her lap. This made me think of Jingfang, and I felt for her keenly in her present plight. But when I remembered the strange idea in Bohe's head, I drove all visions of her out of my mind.

That night I slept badly, troubled by strange dreams. Getting up very late, my head heavy, I had to make an effort to go downhill and visit Bohe.

The day was fine, the sunshine warm, and, except for pockets of snow here and there under the trees and by the walls, the mountain path was dry. Stick in hand, I walked at a leisurely pace to my friend's house.

Bohe was ill and his wife hovered around his bed nursing him. They appeared to be closer than usual.

He seemed only a little under the weather. Jingfang told me it was the result of drinking too much the previous evening and wandering about in the wind half the night. She seemed unaware that he had been quite sober when he came to my house and revealed so much. He obviously hadn't told her. Now, ill in bed, it was even easier to fool her. As a matter of fact, even I was taken in by his manner toward her. I began to wonder whether I had been dreaming.

I was glad, of course, to see them reconciled. During my short visit I said not a word about what had happened the previous night. There was a gentle smile on his face all the time I was there.

Home again, I thought about their strange relationship. I still wanted to know the answer to their riddle, but the more I pondered the more puzzled I became, until finally my head was aching.

All this excitement was too much for my nerves. My health deteriorated. For a fortnight or so, I was laid up in bed. By the time I was well enough to stroll down hill with the help of a stick, the bright spring days had come.

My friends did not come to see me during my illness. At about the time of my recovery I received a letter signed by both of them and posted in Marseilles. They had booked a passage on a boat due to sail for China.

There were no more letters from them after this, so I did not know what they were doing at home. I still remembered the young couple sometimes when loneliness overwhelmed me. I sincerely wished them happiness.

Four years later I went to spend my summer vacation in a seaside town in the south of France.

I often went to the beach to bask in the sun. There were very few Chinese here, and one day the sight of a Chinese couple with a little boy on the beach caught my attention. They had just come out of the water. The woman led the child to a beach parasol. Her profile and figure were familiar, and so was her voice as she talked to the boy. As I approached, full of curiosity, she turned and I got a good look at her face. "Jingfang!" I exclaimed, pleasantly surprised.

She got up and ran over to me crying happily, "So it's you, Zisheng! I didn't know you were still in France." She gripped my hand and shook it warmly.

She was not much changed except that she seemed in better health, more cheerful and happy.

"When did you come?" I asked, impressed by her healthy tan. "Why didn't you send me word?" Then I pointed at the little boy who was coming toward us. "Is that your son?"

"We came more than two months ago. But we've been here only a few days. You must see my baby." She fetched the child and made him greet me. He was not quite four and the image of his father, particularly about the mouth and eyes.

I patted the boy on the shoulder, mumbling something, and wondered why Bohe hadn't come over to join us but was napping there under the parasol. "I must go and say hello to Bohe," I said.

Without a word she followed me back to the parasol. The man there, who stood up at once, was a complete stranger. I stood woodenly in front of him, not knowing what to say.

"This is my husband." Jingfang introduced us, giving a name that I hardly heard.

I mumbled a few polite remarks and left. Jingfang agreed to accompany me a little way. When asked for news of Bohe, she had none to give. She couldn't tell me anything about him, not even whether he was alive or dead. Noticing that these questions distressed her, I desisted and we parted.

The young man with Jingfang was gentle, strong, and tall. She must be happy with him. I don't know whether Bohe is dead or alive, but if he knew how she was getting on he ought to be satisfied. For this was just what he wanted.

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