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The Outcast

Small Wars

SADIE JONES

The Uninvited Guests

VINTAGE BOOKS

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EDWARD SWIFT DEPARTS

Since her marriage to Edward Swift, three years after the sudden death of her first husband Horace Torrington, Charlotte had changed her position at the breakfast table in order to accommodate her new husband's needs: specifically, aiding him in the spreading of toast and cutting of meat, owing to his having suffered the loss of his left arm at the age of twenty-three in an unfortunate encounter with the narrow wheels of a speeding gig, out of which he had fallen on the driveway of his then home in County Wicklow. Having always faced the window and wide view, now Charlotte sat on Edward's left, and faced him.

Her eldest children, Emerald and Clovis, aged nineteen and twenty respectively, but for whom the word 'children' is not inaccurate at the point at which we discover them, did not like this new arrangement. Nor did they like or approve of Edward Swift; single arm notwithstanding, they found he did not fit.

Clovis Torrington balanced the pearl-handled butter knife on his middle finger and narrowed his eyes at his mother. His eyes were dramatic, and he very often narrowed them at people to great effect.

‘We can’t leave Sterne,’ he stated.

‘It would be a great shame,’ acknowledged his stepfather.

Clovis curled his lip, loathingly.

‘Clovis . . .’ his mother growled.

Edward wiped his mouth with a napkin thoroughly and stood up.

‘It’s all right, Charlotte,’ he said, kissing her forehead as he rose. ‘I’ll know more when I return, Clovis. And neither you nor your sisters – nor your mother – need worry about it until then, but enjoy Emerald’s birthday and try not to fret. I’m sorry I can’t be here for your guests.’

Charlotte stood, too, and linked her arm through his.

‘You’re both very naughty,’ she said over her shoulder as they left the room.

Emerald had not spoken, but sat throughout breakfast rigid with self-restraint. Now she glanced at Clovis, tears blurring both the scowling sight of him and the vast tapestry that hung behind his head. It was a hunting scene of stags and hounds, a faded, many-layered narrative she knew by heart in all its leaping chases across the flowered forest floor.

‘Fret!’ said her brother with contempt at the word, stablemates as it was with *sulk* and *pet*.

Emerald shook her head. In his present mood he was the very personification of all three. ‘Oh, Clovis,’ she said.

From the hall, Edward’s voice carried easily to them: ‘Clovis! Ferryman needs to be taken out. If you’ve time today I’d be very much obliged to you.’

His good-tempered authority would have been impressive – lovable – had the very fact of the man not been intolerable to them. Clovis was mutinous. ‘He ought to take his damned horse out himself.’

Emerald pushed her plate away.

‘He can’t very well if he’s in Manchester trying to save the house, can he?’ she said, and she got up and left the room by the other door so as not to encounter her mother or stepfather again.

He did not go after her. Clovis wasn’t somebody who went after people, rather people tended to go after him.

Unable to escape her misery, Emerald wandered up and down in the kitchen for a few moments, aggravating Florence Trieves and Myrtle, and then went out into the garden by the side door.

It was the last day of April. She felt the extraordinary softness of the season on her face and braced herself

for a strict talking-to; if it must be audible, she ought at least to get some distance from the house.

The air was complicated with the smells of sharp new things emerging from damp soil. Small tatters of clouds dotted the watery sky. To her left was the door to the kitchen garden and stables. Ahead of her, reaching far and further, in the broadest geometrical sweep, was the country over which Sterne presided. It spread out beneath and beyond, reaching into straining, dazzling blue distance, where the fields became indistinct and hills dissolved to nothing.

The house stood on a piece of land so cleanly semi-circular, so strictly rounded, that it might have been a cake-stand left behind in the landscape by some refined society of giants. It was covered with deep, soft turf as one might lay a thick rug over a table, and all the busy pattern of fields, hedges, cows and villages scattered beyond, toy miniatures a child's imagination would produce.

From the front of the house, the edge of the gardens formed a ha-ha between order and free nature. It was bordered by a knee-high sharp-trimmed box hedge, lest dogs should rush at it and fall off. Small children had been known to topple, although happily the slope, on falling, was much gentler than it first appeared. Clovis and Emerald, when much younger, had used to take running jumps off the apparent precipice, terrifying

visitors unfamiliar with the topography, only to emerge laughing hilariously, covered with dandelion fluff or mud or clinging claws of long couch grass.

Emerald walked along the curve of the low box hedge with her head bowed, like a lonely merry-go-round horse.

'This helpless grief over what amounts to a few rooms and a rather poor roof is irrational,' she began, 'and frankly—' she stopped walking, '—ludicrous.'

She turned her face to the house, the windows of which glowed variously. 'There's no use looking at me like that,' she said to it.

She crossed the gravel, and went towards the other part of the garden, where were the borders and sundial. 'And there's not even the excuse of ancestry!' she said out loud again, and indignant.

And it was true; no generations of Torringtons had lived at Sterne. No generations of Torringtons had lived anywhere particularly, as far as they knew. They were a wandering, needs-must sort of family, who made their livings disparately, in clerking, mills or shipping; travelled to France for work in tailoring, or stopped at home in Somerset, Shropshire or Suffolk, to play some minor role in greater projects: designing a lowly component of a reaching cathedral or a girdered bridge. Some had been in business, one or two in service; there was an artist, some soldiers, all dead. All dead.

Her father's life had been distinguished only by his having the daring to buy Sterne. The house and land had been purchased rashly at the peak of what transpired to be transient – too harsh to call it flukish – financial success when, first married to Charlotte and bathed in her adoration, he had thought Torrington might be the name of the sort of man whose family would live in such a house. Horace had loved Sterne as he loved Charlotte and later, his children: loyally, generously and gratefully. The children, too, feeling that they were at the end of a line, as children always do (for indeed, they are), loved Sterne as exhausted travellers with lifetimes of migration behind them might love their first and last home. Sterne was the mythology of their parents' marriage, their father's legacy, and it had given them the very best of childhoods. Beyond that, it was beautiful, and the effect of it on their souls was inestimable; once found, they were all of them loath to give it up. Unfortunately, Horace Torrington left business for agriculture, about which he was utterly ignorant, at precisely the worst moment he could have chosen. At his untimely death he was very deeply in debt. Emerald often thought it odd that such dire financial straits should be cheerfully nicknamed 'in the red'; black was a far likelier colour. Her father's increasing debt was a dark hole into which they all might yet fall.

In reality, Sterne was two houses. One was a strange,

shallow red-brick manor house of two floors and great charm, built around 1760, where the family now lived; the other – predecessor and companion – was attached behind, as the long side of the L, a great barn-like building of stone, where once one of the first lords of that manor would have laid his fires and roasted his meat, but which now stood almost empty in graceless neglect.

In the busy scullery of the New House there was a brief rise of shallow steps to a door of thick wood, mostly kept barred and bolted, which gave onto the cavern of the Old House. The two were joined utterly in the wide raftered and beamed spaces of their roofs, like Siamese twins. If one were in the attic (as the children often had been, galloping about in the dust or lying reading in the dancing window-light), only close inspection could discover the join, for the ribs of the roofs and the planks of the floors were of similar scale, and in the roof spaces the air was always dim and faded. There had been over the years much talk of demolishing the older building, but it had so very many convenient and entertaining uses, especially for storage and on rainy days, and they had not been able to do it.

A magnolia tree grew in the courtyard at the crook of the L. As a child, Emerald used to try to touch the thick flowers by leaning out of a landing casement. She would reach as far as she could, until the tight stitches of her