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Among Ruins

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Extract

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Chapter One

Being lazy, timid and English, Charles Compson had thought that marriage to the unobtainable beauty with whom he was in love, would grant him automatic membership of the easily successful, that he would join the ranks of those who no longer had to try. And indeed, over the subtle congratulatory acclaim, had at once come the deafening winner's clash of yellow coins and treasure – pouring into an unmanageable mountain beside this fulfilled aspiration, the one great success in his life so far. But now this initially gleaming pile, never quite as big as desired, was slithering away at an alarming rate. Its speed of disappearance was almost as great as the changes that would have to take effect should it not reach its original height – or higher, above the visible skies, so that the forays into it might not be noticed.

He always drove fast on the road north as if in urgent haste, and the children's feuds and occasional requests had no effect on the speed.

'Oh, *please*!'

Martin hung his fingers over the back of the driving seat.

'Just, you know, the frog –'

'Sit back! I can't see properly. All right.'

Charles's earliest anecdotal memory was of having come across a huge black growth in the sand by the first of the lakes on his parents' land. Already on an adventure he had persuaded himself to bend down to touch it, but at the moment of tentative contact, it had sprouted bloated dark limbs and hauled itself towards the water with the ungainly movements of a spastic. He had almost been sick, had not dared to run in case chased, but had walked quickly back to the public path that led home.

Though unwilling to explore the meaning during the telling, he had at the time put this transfiguration down to a manifestation of justice. He had been out alone in the park without permission and the sort of retribution that would be bound to follow would have no need of the laws of nature.

The children liked the story and always asked for it at some point during the car journey to Northumberland, so as to try again to fish out the ghostly and moral aspects hovering within it. It was this, the repetitive nature of their amusement that Charles's wife, Vivienne, found most annoying. She had no interest in the supernatural, or for that matter the natural; she was bored by both.

'Had it come *out* of the ground?'

'No.'

'Were you scared?'

'Yes.'

'You were the same age as me?'

'About that.'

Vivienne sat unmoving at his side. Sensing her disapproval, Charles gave her knee a clumsy pat.

'What's your earliest memory, then?'

'I haven't got any.'

But she did give a little laugh. She was proud of her own dogged traditionalism, which amused no one but herself; she had always made a point of saying that nothing of her childhood could be of interest to herself or others.

Charles noticed Laura's eyes in the driving mirror.

'Why don't you tell us yours, then?'

But her eyes fell out of sight of their vigil in the mirror.

'I haven't got any either.'

She turned and gave Martin a significant look. He responded immediately. With shrill enthusiasm, he struggled up and launched into a disjointed tale of a ghost with red eyes and just so tall that there was – he thrust forward an inch between finger and thumb – that much between him and the sky . . . By

the punch line, a marvel of banal originality, they had swept to a halt in front of the elegant main gates, half hidden by a bend in the road.

Chapter Two

Laura, walking at a more sensible pace, watched Martin running along the corridors like a train, touching each picture as he passed it. More often than not, he was part of the nursery during the school holidays and being neither guest nor family, he was spoilt. His father, Mark, a foreign correspondent, had been at university with Charles, and his mother, Anne, was Charles's oldest friend and neighbour. Constantly travelling, they were grateful for the assurances that Martin's presence was welcome company for Laura.

Now, as was his habit on arrival, he rushed up to the birdcage containing Nanny Hart's budgie Bobby and artfully began to coo through the bars, asking shrilly his usual whimsical questions as to its habits.

'Come on now!'

He took two giant's bounds to the table, then wriggled into his chair.

'Clean?'

Nanny Hart took Laura's other hand and opened it. Inside was a blue pencil.

Laura blushed.

'It's for you.'

'It's not much use to me.'

She put it on the table and turned to Martin. He crammed the toast into his mouth in two huge bites.

'A giant would eat Bobby just like that!'

She took the remains of the toast out of his hand, didn't comment on his laughter.

'So you obviously liked the last dancing class.'

'No – I hated it!'

'It's an early night for you, my boy.'

His attendance at these dancing classes with the royal children had given his presence in the nursery the final seal of acceptance. When Miss Hart accompanied the two of them to these lessons, as she had done the previous week, her eyes remained on the unwieldy stumping boy, enchanted to find himself a giant. If her glance did drift towards the girls' section of the ballroom, Laura's eyes would often be agonisingly turned towards hers or deliberately away, blushing as she continued on tripping with oafish exertion in her fairy rounds.

Miss Hart was a stern woman and disliked the unorthodox. No one could have accused her of hypocrisy; she was quite universal in her systems. Her own lesbianism was squeezed into such tight suppression that it only occasionally had to burst out into gross sentimentality. Her more acceptable alcoholism was indulged in consistent polite secrecy; if it intruded into nursery life at all, it was hidden underneath the covering form of neglect. After dark there was very little the children could do that would draw attention to transgressions of any sort. However, her authority still held during this time and even her occasional maudlin outpourings encouraged no outbreaks of naughtiness. They would play together quietly, knowing when it was time to stop and her good night attentions would have all the distant regret of history.

'She's very pretty! Is that her younger brother?'

'No, but he's my little angel.'

In a few soft words (she had the necessary shorthand of the dancing class audience down to a fine art) Miss Hart had explained to this new nanny, the relationship of the two children, reiterating her preference. And indeed, for those who liked that sort of thing, Martin's animated face was more attractive than Laura's set expression. Her face had been screwed up and guarded like a monkey's and had the same narrow outlines. Even her overabundant curls seemed a mismanaged attempt to bestow sweetness on an unsympathetic site, bouncing uneasily in the pursuit of her aggressive impulses, now curtailed in this ornate room.

'Oh well, it must be nice to have them, friends together.'

And the pleasantry of Martin's presence being a blessing was constantly echoed between the families but, in reality, Laura and he were neither friends nor enemies, but just unconsciously now part of each other's landscape. Occasionally she looked forward to the moment of his arrival, since she had things to tell him and occasionally he responded enthusiastically to such secrets.

And that morning to his parents over breakfast, he had babbled so many anticipatory plans for the puppy that had been promised, that Anne had confessed to the Compsons as she dropped him off in time for the journey north, of being a little jealous of his evident preference of home.

Chapter Three

The library curtains fell voluptuously, like the dresses of female saints, patterned and glorious. Having once or twice visited his London home in the old days, Charles's country house was smaller than Freddie had envisioned, but its interiors were splendid indeed. Recently Freddie had spent some considerable time wandering around the National Gallery. Although British painters were in a minority, the English having always been stronger in appreciation than application, it was a collection that represented all that the nation had chosen over the years. Thus surely it would provide some clues towards the national psyche? But really, in his dignified stroll around the seventeenth- and then eighteenth-century rooms, his mind was full of the dismal finality of his own story having finished.

His first expulsion from Africa, thirteen years earlier, after a bloodless and temporarily successful coup on the British governor general's part, had brought him attention and acclaim back in England. Dinners had been given for him and invitations issued to his Eaton Square apartment. Now, thirteen years later, on this second exile, his more dramatic stories of death and battle soon seemed to pall, though on his first few months of arrival, this had pleased him, suggesting that he had been correct in thinking that the English had got their priorities right.

One literary friend had had a sudden frantic enthusiasm on listening to his tales, and had insisted that he should produce in biographical form a sort of African Odyssey of betrayal and fortitude. He had arranged for him to have lunch with a representative of a well-known publishing house. Even this man, so professional in his attentions, had fallen finally into a kind of weariness. At first, with discriminating smiles, he had interjected his enthusiasm for the project, in between

Freddie's laconic but unceasing descriptions of betrayal and narrow squeaks on the bloody road away from the besieged Mengo Hill Palace. But by the end of the second course, he was glancing at his watch; his voice had dropped at least an octave from its initially excited pitch.

His book had recently been published, and a party given for its launch by the same literary friend who had initiated its creation. It had been a friendly gathering but hardly luminous. The book had then, over the course of the next two months, received two short but respectful reviews from Africa-loving journalists. They had not been able to resist putting in their own versions of the events described, but both had come up with the commendation 'unique' when referring back to his.

'I'll put it here, next to another favourite.'

Charles had seemed genuinely to appreciate the book, which Freddie had signed for him, 'to afternoons with friends'. He pulled out *Eminent Victorians* so as to place Freddie's next to it.

'A valued part of my library!'

Now Freddie was drunk. Lying back on the sofa complacently, he continued his meandering perusal of the room. He was glad that Edward had persuaded him into the visit, having described Charles's Northumberland property as 'enchanting', enunciated in that special way that Freddie took to mean 'Not commensurate with my own'. And the house was by no means as grand as Edward's, being considerably smaller, but it had dignity. He looked out of the windows at the wild weather. Black crows were being pushed upwards and backwards by the wind in exuberant abandonment to superior elements.

'Hooray!'

The door had opened and the children were coming in tentatively, but giggling at Edward Kielder's raised arms and greeting. Charles was out of the room and Vivienne's manner turned brisk and almost panicky.

'Children, this is Lord and Lady Kielder – you've met before haven't you? And this is King Freddie – Martin and Laura.'

'Hello. Hello.'

The children's eyes slid away as soon as they'd completed their greeting. The titles presented so abruptly had put them off and the King was black.

'Where has Charles gone?'

Vivienne had no enthusiasm for the forthcoming puppy ceremony, but she felt it unfair that she was to have to bear its burden.

'Oh, Vivienne – he was going to find a record we'd talked about.'

And as Charles made his returning entrance, the notes of this favourite song just preceded him.

Freddie circled his hand in gratitude, singing along when possible in a high soft voice:

> '. . . If I were a catfish
> Swimming in the deep blue sea
> I'd have all you women
> Diving after me . . .'

Nanny Hart always made her opinion quite clear and the children too had their own little joke concerning this particular song heard distantly and so often up on the nursery floor. Now they laughed together, with little attempt at their usual concealment.

Charles ignored them, and asked Edward, 'Good, isn't it?'

He attempted to snap his fingers to the rhythm.

'Oh, very lovely! Such a funny and sad little song! Leadbelly – what do you think children?'

They quite liked Lord Kielder (now even to them, his title seemed an appropriate excuse for his eccentricity, and so no mouthful to use), and his kindly smile, an anarchic gleam behind it, brought out their cruelty.

'Lovely –!'

They laughed further as the song built to a mournful climax.

'– trum*pet*!'

They screwed up their faces disgustedly, clapped their hands to their ears in a paroxysm of exhibitionism.

'Not trumpet. Harmonica.'

There was a tap at the door and the room fell silent.

'Come in.'

The children, having heard the sullen nature of Charles's correction, were subdued suddenly. Superstitiously, they feared that their rude high spirits might have ruined the occasion altogether. And when the door inched open with suitable drama, revealing at its base a brown terrier face (a hand just visible behind it, urging it into the room) they hardly dared to be too appreciative of the moment.

After initial interest – even the sulky Charles could not resist the lure of the puppy – the adults went back to their conversation. But suddenly Freddie slid down towards the children. The little dog, surprised, gave two disconcerted yaps in his direction. It was awkward having him down there, sprawled out elegantly on the floor. He snapped his fingers in comical timing. The puppy at last decided to enjoy the humour of the gesture and pounced. They all laughed and Laura grabbed the puppy, asking, 'Do you have any dogs?'

'I used to have two pet bears at my palace.'

The children stared at him suspiciously.

'What were they called?'

'Hymn and Honey.'

He leant towards the puppy, and growled, 'And they would have eaten *you – right up*!'

'No.'

Laura got up and raised her arms.

'No. He would have grabbed them and –'

Her wrestling movements caught Vivienne's eye and she called Freddie over with apologies. As they walked, he referred back to his time on the floor.

'What delightful children; so pretty, your daughter.'

'Rather showing off at the moment, I'm afraid.'

Freddie demurred politely. He imagined English disingenuity in her clipped reply. But Laura was at that moment mauling round the dog in rather too much of a winsome way for Vivienne's liking. Looking at her face, surrounded by dark curls, pressed against the dog's head, looking up towards them from time to time, her artfulness struck an irritating note.

After the birth of Laura, Vivienne had gaily confounded those who might have expected the desire for a son, with her satisfaction in having produced this daughter. With tones of authority, she had insisted that both she and Charles had wanted a girl, and she had believed it of herself certainly. Perhaps there had been some thought of the burden that would have ensued from the birth of a son. But she had brushed over too lightly the prospect of an echo of her younger self.

From her hospital bed, she had decided on the name over Charles's preferred Elizabeth – her rights of choice were unassailable. But over the years, complied with on all matters concerning Laura, her authoritarianism had died down with her interest.

As she grew up, Laura looked more and more like her paternal grandfather. But still, a faintly disturbing image had sprung directly from a time Vivienne would have preferred gone, and was growing, pushing out and developing in a similar way to her own. It was a replay she was bound to have to watch. It felt as inescapable as the dream she had had that night. In it she had watched Laura and another play and argue in an orchard. It had been all too prettily reminiscent of those Victorian paintings, filled with blossoms and dire warnings of punishments about to descend for transgressions that would seem in modern times to be inoffensive.

'Now, are you music lovers accompanying us on our walk?'

'Yes, they are.'

Charles's curt tones accurately reflected his deflation, his remaining irritation at the children's priggish conservatism of taste. He was even irritated at Edward's invitation. He would have preferred that they be left behind.