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Opening Extract from...

The Song Collector

Written by Natasha Solomons

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Hartgrove Hall is ours again. It's a strange sensation, this supposed homecoming – the prodigal sons returning all at once to Dorset on a bloody cold November morning. We are silent on the drive from the station to the house. Chivers steers the cantankerous Austin at a steady twenty miles per hour, the General parked beside him on the front seat absolutely upright as though off to inspect the troops, while Jack, George and I are jammed into the back, trying not to meet one another's eyes as we stare resolutely out of the windows.

I'm nervous about seeing her again. Hartgrove Hall is our long-lost love, the pen pal we've been mooning over in our thoughts for the last seven years, but each of us is submerged in lonely and silent anxiety at the prospect of our reunion. We know the house has had a tricky war – a parade of British regiments followed by the Americans, all of them tenants with mightier preoccupations than pruning the roses or sweeping the drawing-room chimney or halting the onslaught of deathwatch beetle that has been gobbling through the rafters for ever.

As the car creeps higher and into the shadow of the hill, hoarfrost is draped across the branches like banners and where the trees meet across the narrow lane, we plunge through a tunnel of silver and white. The car turns into the long driveway and there she is, Hartgrove Hall, bathed in early morning haze. To my relief she's still the beauty I remember. I can't see her flaws through the kindly mist, only the buttery warmth of the stone front, the thick limestone slabs on the roof drizzled with yellowing lichen. I climb out of the car and absorb the multitude of high mullioned windows and the elegant slope

of the porch, and out of childish habit suddenly recalled, I count the skulk of stone foxes from the family crest that are carved on the flushwork. Ivy half conceals the smallest fox, so that he pokes his snout out from amongst the leaves as if he's shy. I'm frightfully glad to see him. I thought I'd recalled every detail of the house. I'd paced its walks and corridors each night before falling asleep and yet, already, here is something I'd quite forgotten.

The yellow sandstone façade is the same but the wisteria has been hacked away and without it the front looks naked. All of the windows are unlit and the house looks cold, unready for guests. We're not guests, I remind myself. We are the family returned. Yet it's an odd sort of homecoming: instead of Chivers or one of the maids lingering in the porch to welcome us, a major from the Guards waits on the front steps, stamping his feet to keep warm. On seeing us, he stops abruptly and salutes the General. The major thanks him for his honourable sacrifice and generosity even though we all know it's bunkum and the house was requisitioned by law. Although, I suppose, knowing the General, he would have surrendered the house in any case out of a sense of duty. The General takes great pleasure in doing his duty. The more unpleasant the sacrifice, the more he enjoys it.

The major clearly wants to be off but Father keeps him talking outside for a good fifteen minutes while it starts to sleet. We all stand there rigid with cold and boredom. I'm amazed that Jack doesn't declare, 'Bugger this, I'm off to inspect the damage done to the old girl,' and disappear, but then he and George have been demobbed for only a month or so. Beneath the civvy clothes they still possess a soldier's habits and to walk away from a senior officer wouldn't just be poor manners but a disciplinary offence.

After an age, the General allows the unfortunate major to depart and marches indoors. Jack, George and I hesitate,

unwilling to follow. I want our reunion to be private and, as I glance at my brothers, it is clear that they feel the same. Jack lingers for a moment, then turns back down the steps, making for the river, while George heads in the opposite direction, crossing the lawns towards the lake. I wait for a minute, gulping cold, fresh air, feeling the bite and tang of it on my teeth, and then slip into the house. The great hall is almost as frigid as it is outside. In the vast and soot-stained inglenook there is no fire. I am almost certain that there used to be a constant fire. The requisite carved foxes gaze out from the stone-carved struts, chilly and forlorn. I suppose there is no one to light a fire now and I don't suppose there will be again. I notice that the mantelpiece is missing. I can't think how it was taken or why.

The walls are bereft of paintings. The good ones haven't hung here for years. They were flogged, one Gainsborough and Stubbs at a time, but my ancestors were sentimental chaps. Until the army requisitioned the house, copies of the originals used to hang around the hall – gloomy reminders of what was lost to Christie's to pay inheritance tax, veterinarian bills, servants' wages and to replace rotting windows. Some of the copies were rather good, others less so – peculiar, carnival-mirror distortions of the originals. For years, Jack, George and I used to play 'spot the imposter' and attempt to guess which of the bewigged and unsmiling portraits were copies. Then the General told us that none of them was real and the game was rendered pointless.

The last painting to go was a dear Constable landscape of the woodland beneath Hartgrove barrow. The painter stands at the top of the ridge, gazing down at a brown wood dabbed with autumn light. Somewhere in the painting a nightingale sings – the last of the year. The copy of the Constable is quite decent. I've always liked it, even though the colours are second rate and the lines muddy – but I can still hear the

nightingale and that's what matters. George sent it to me, along with his letter explaining that the house was to be requisitioned. I'd been alone at school when the news had come, and it had left me disconsolate. Only George would have thought to send the painting with the horrid news – a kind memento of home to sustain me. Inevitably the painted view began to supplant the one in my imagination until I began to see the barrow and woods third hand – Constable's vision re-daubed by a copyist.

I return to the car, retrieve the picture from the boot and rehang it on a nail in the hall. It looks lost and small.

I'm chilled and feel queasy from the pervasive stench of damp. Disheartened, I retreat down the steps and out across the tangle of gardens before striking uphill towards the ridge of Hartgrove barrow. I set off at a lick until, breathless from exertion, I pause at the first of the grass terraces rippling the hillside to look down at the house. It's different for me than for the others. I was eleven when she was taken in '39 and I don't remember how she's supposed to be, not with the absolute clarity of Jack or George. From my vantage point I can see the burned-out south wing. An accident with an ember smouldering in an unswept chimney, according to the letter sent by the War Office, although Jack heard rumours it was a game gone awry in the Officers' Mess. They'd been bottling farts into brandy bottles – such an ignominious end for four hundred years of history: sent up in smoke by a lit fart.

I'm not surprised no one could face confessing the truth to the General. I spent much of the war evading him myself. Not that it took much effort – the General's war was spent preening in Whitehall; he was delighted to partake in another helping of battle even at a distance. Between school and

holidays dawdled away at the houses of pals, I managed not to endure more than the occasional uneasy luncheon with him at the club.

From up here I can see the exposed timbers, looking like broken ribs, and the house appears unsteady and uneven, her former symmetry quite spoiled. An invalid with her shattered limb still attached. The lawns are sloshed into mud. Half the limes on the avenue are missing so that the driveway resembles a mouth with most of the teeth knocked out. The woodland under the ridge is balding in patches, where scores of the trees have been felled so that only the stumps remain, stubbling the hillside.

I sit down on an anthill and cry, relieved no one can see me. I wonder how the bloody hell we're going to put the old girl back together. There are no paintings left to flog. No forgotten Turner lurking in the attic. Canning, the aged and recalcitrant estate manager, is muttering about wanting to retire. But then I swat away my doubts and revel in the pleasure of home. I take a breath of cold, larch-spiced air. Happiness rises up through me, fierce as brandy fumes.



In the dreary lull after Christmas, Jack informs us with great delight that he has persuaded the General to host a New Year's Eve party. The General doesn't like parties. They distract from the important things in life: namely shooting pheasant and fishing. Oddly, however, he enjoys a good war, even though it disrupts the same things. George is perfectly thrilled – he can't quite believe Jack's managed it. I'm not surprised. The General will agree to almost anything so long as it's Jack who asks.

George and I set about readying the house. No mean feat as each day brings the discovery of yet more damage. The panelling in the great hall has been stripped away in places – whether

for a lark or for kindling, we'll never know. Not only is the mantelpiece missing on the grand inglenook, but part of the chimneystack has been knocked off so that when it rains, sleets or worse, water pours down the chimney and puddles on the hearth. Someone left the front door open a few nights ago, and when I stumbled up to bed I saw two blackbirds taking a bath. They looked quite self-possessed as they dabbled, eyeing me with great condescension as I swayed past with a glass of whisky. I thought I'd dreamed it, but when I came down in the morning, not a little hung-over, I found a spotted trail of white bird shit across the hall. The General appears to have neither the cash nor the inclination to make repairs. Planning for a party is a much pleasanter task than considering the larger future of the house.

On the morning of New Year's Eve, George and I wander dismally from room to room, wondering how on God's earth the place is going to be fit for a hundred of the county's finest by the evening. At least we don't have expectations to live up to. Even in the years before the war, Hartgrove wasn't renowned for the calibre of its hospitality: there was always decent grog, but even then we couldn't afford the staff or compete with the swagger of our neighbours. The family name is as old and threadbare as the sixteenth-century carpet that George and I hang on the wall in the drawing room in a futile attempt to keep the wind from sneaking in through the cracks in the plaster.

Jack, of course, isn't with us. He imparted a variety of instructions over breakfast, informed us somewhat vaguely as to how many had accepted the invitation ('Fifty or so, I should think – almost certainly not more than sixty, a hundred tops') and then immediately left for the station – no doubt to collect his latest rosewater-scented poppet. Clearly his role was simply to persuade the General to acquiesce to the party, not to bother with the actual organisation. I'm

torn between irritation at Jack and pleasure – we've been apart for so long that there is still a novelty in his irksome habits. I'm oddly reassured to discover that the army has not reformed him.

One of the new dailies flicks a rag over the floor and the other pokes half-heartedly at the fire in the dining room that at half past nine is already threatening to give up with a whine of damp wood. There has been a parade of help through the Hall in the last few weeks, each girl more belligerent than the last. None can stick it for more than a few days. It's never quite clear whether they've walked out or whether Chivers has dismissed them or, as Jack suggested, buried them under the roses. We never *do* see the girls again. In the years before the war the house was mostly staffed with Chivers' relatives. He always introduced them vaguely, saying, 'Katy, Maud, Joan, the youngest daughter of my sister in Bournemouth,' or 'My Liverpool cousin's girl', but I suppose even Chivers had to run out of relatives at some point.

George and I survey the two surly maids, neither of them acknowledging our presence. Long gone are the days when our appearance would make them withdraw with a blush (not that I can remember, but so Jack tells me and perhaps it's true).

'I say, would you two lend us a hand getting the old place ready for a bash tonight?' says George with false camaraderie and an awkward smile. George is never easy in company. I'm surprised that he's so keen on the party – I suspect he's pretending for Jack and my sakes. George is a thoroughly decent fellow, the best I know.

The girls look up. They do not smile back. They know instantly we're amateurs. I fear it's hopeless. We need Jack. Jack has all the charm; within two ticks he'd have the two girls eager to help, just to please him.

'We got a lot to get through,' says the larger of the girls.

'We're only paid through till twelve.' She's stout with deep-set brown eyes, like a pair of little wet stones.

'Oh, gosh, bother,' says George, deflating. I can hear him cursing Jack in his head for going off and leaving us like this.

I reach into my pocket, pulling out a portion of the General's Christmas cash ('Presents, unless they're guns, are for girls'). I stuff it into the large maid's stubby fingers. 'When you're finished for the morning, then.'

At twelve on the dot, they reappear in the drawing room, ready to help. They're almost smiling. I wonder how much of my Christmas money I handed over, but I don't care. I want this bash to be splendid. Jack and George have had parties in the mess, and they've travelled, seen things. Terrible things, perhaps, but at least they've been somewhere, done something. I spent the whole war at school. As we hunt out unbroken chairs from the four corners of the house, I try once again to ask George about it. I've attempted to persuade Jack and George to divulge details on various occasions with a notable lack of success.

'What was it actually like? I think it's rotten that you won't tell me.'

He shrugs. 'There's not much to tell. In the most part it was frightfully dull.'

'And in the other part?'

'Unpleasant.'

'Dull or unpleasant, that's all?' I ask, incredulous that this is all he'll give me.

'Mostly yes. Sometimes, when we were particularly unfortunate it was dull *and* unpleasant.'

I wonder if he's teasing me, but that's not like George. He doesn't like to be ribbed himself, so rarely pokes fun at anyone else. We set down a small and only slightly stained sofa in the corner of the drawing room, pausing for a minute to catch our breath.

'I can't really picture you as a soldier, George.'

He smiles. 'No, neither could I. I think that was part of the problem.'

'What was the other part?'

He chuckles but doesn't answer. 'It's jolly nice to be home. I missed the rain. Never thought that was possible but it is. Sunshine's all very well but I've discovered that what I like best is the surprise of it after rain.'

I'm not sure what to say to this. Freezing rain is smashing against the windows, sneaking in through the ill-fitting panes and making small pools on the sills. We could do with a surprise of sunshine about now.

'What were the other chaps like?'

'Oh, all sorts. Every type. You know.'

I don't know at all. I sigh and abandon my questioning.

Cambridge is pleasant enough – they're decent fellows, precisely the sort I knew at school – but I hanker for something different, less familiar. I can't study music (chaps like us don't study music. It simply isn't done, according to Father) so the entire rigmarole feels utterly pointless, a dreary extension of school. If the war were still going on, I'd be in the thick of it instead of banished to endure cosy little tutorials in fireside snugs and listen to the assorted triumphs of Henries Tudor. And if I can't have music, then I'd like a bit of war. I can't say this to anyone. Even Jack's wayward grin would falter and George, well, George would quietly walk away, head bowed. The General would approve the sentiment and that would be the worst condemnation of all.



The guests arrive meticulously late at a quarter to nine. In the dark the house doesn't look quite so dilapidated. Candlelight, branches of holly and carefully placed globes of mistletoe

conceal the worst of it. With the help of the two girls, George and I have made a pretty decent show. There's a surprising amount of wine. When the house was requisitioned, the General didn't fuss about packing away the carpets or the furniture (all strictly third rate anyhow – more decrepit than antique) but he and Chivers did hide away the good drink. They had the gardener build a false wall in the cellar, and while the soldiers graffitied obscenities in the downstairs loo they didn't defile the pre-war burgundy, so in the General's view the place has survived unscathed in essentials.

The night is cold, several degrees below freezing, and even before midnight the ground glints, thick with frost. The yew hedges are unkempt, overgrown from years of neglect and brushed with white like a drunk's untrimmed beard. It's too icy for cars – for those that still own them anyhow – and most people choose to walk. We've staked torches along the driveway and they flare out, banners of red flame in the darkness. The gloom provides a mask of perfect restoration and from outside the house looks splendid once again. You can't see that the southern wing is burned out or that several windows along the front are boarded up or that the lawns are mown only by the sheep, at present snoozing in the shelter of the garden wall. All the party guests perceive is the yellow light spilling from the unbroken bay windows onto the terrace, ivy patterning the sandstone porch and the frost feathering the slate roof. I vow silently that if ever I'm rich, I'll return the Hall to her former beauty so that she always looks like this, even in daylight. I drink a glass of sloe gin and watch the river, a black ribbon spooling noiselessly below.

'Jack's still not back, blast him.'

George is angry. Well, as angry as it's possible for George to be. I really can't picture him as a soldier, sallying forth full of rage and fury. He glances around the crowd of party-goers,

tense, his forehead sweaty. We need Jack to play host. Neither of us is up to the task. George huffs and grumbles.

'Every time. Every bloody time. He swans in, gives his orders and swans off again. I'm tired of it, Fox. Next time, he can do the hard work. Where the devil's he got to anyhow?'

I say nothing. Jack's undoubtedly in a pub somewhere, nestled beside a toasty fire with his latest popsy, having lost track of time after his second or third pint. We move inside and we're immediately engulfed in fur. The county girls have cracked them out again, now the war's done and it's no longer vulgar. I'm enveloped in the camphor whiff of mothballs and armpit.

'Vivien. Caroline. How wonderful to see you.'

The girls incline their cheeks to be kissed.

'Freezing, isn't it? Where's Jack?'

I deflate. No one even comments on the constellation of candles we've dug out or the huge log we've managed to drag inside that roars and crackles in the mantel-less hearth. A gramophone that wasn't new before the war scratches out a tune, but it isn't loud enough to be heard over the voices. No one dances. Half a pig with a tennis ball in its mouth lazes on the vast hall table. Chivers presides with a knife long enough to be a sword but I notice that only the men are eating. The women veer away from the spectacle, slightly revolted. We didn't think of providing anything else. George and I assumed a pig would do it. Vegetables seemed superfluous.

One of the girls wafts over. Her dress is made of a fine, gauzy fabric and her skin is speckled with gooseflesh.

'Hello, Fox. Splendid show. It's all thoroughly charming.'

'Is it, Vivien?'

She laughs. 'No. Not really. But you've tried terribly hard and that's charming enough. But in a house of men, what could anyone expect?'