



## Chapter One

The Titans were gone. They had clashed their last. Sir Edward Feathers, affectionately known as Filth (Failed In London, Try Hong Kong), and Sir Terence Veneering, the two greatest exponents of English and International Law in the engineering and construction industry and the current experts upon the Ethics of Pollution, were dead. Their well-worn armour had fallen from them with barely a clatter and the quiet Dorset village to which they had retired within a very few years of each other (accidentally, for they had hated one another for over fifty years) mourned their passing and wondered who would be distinguished enough to buy their houses.

How they had hated! For over half a century they had been fetching up all over the world, eyeball to eyeball, Hector and Achilles, usually on battlefields far from home, championing or rubbishing – depending on the client – great broken bridges, mouldering reservoirs, wild crumbling new roads across mountain ranges, sewage works, wind farms, ocean barrages and the leaking swimming pools of moguls.





That they had in old age finished up by buying houses next door to each other in a village where there was absolutely nothing to do must have been the result of something the lolling gods had set up one drab day on Olympus to give the legal world a laugh.

And the laugh had been uneasy, because it had been said for years – well, everyone knew – that Edward Feathers' dead wife, Betty, had been the lover of Sir Terry. Or maybe not exactly the lover. But something. There had been something between them. Well, there had been love.

Elisabeth – Betty – Feathers had died some years before the arrival of Sir Terry next door.

Her husband, Old Filth, Sir Edward, the great crag of a man seated above her on the patio pretending to shoot rooks with his walking-stick, a gin and tonic at his elbow, had been left, quite simply, broken-hearted.

Birds and beasts were important to Old Filth. Donkeys' years ago his prep-school headmaster had taught him about birds. It was birds and the language of the natural world and the headmaster, whose name was briefly 'Sir', who had cured him of his awful childhood stammer and enabled him to become an advocate.

His house, Dexters, lay in a long narrow dell off the village hill, bird-haunted and surrounded by trees. Beyond his gate, up the same turn-off and out of sight, Veneering's house stood at the top of the view. Veneering's taller, darker trees hung over the lane but the rooks ignored them. Rooks, thought Old Filth, choose their friends. They will only abandon a friend if they have foreknowledge of disaster. Each



night before sleep and each morning, Filth lay in his bed straight as a sentry, striped Chilprufe pyjamas neatly buttoned, handkerchief in breast pocket carefully folded, and listened to the vigorous clamour of the rooks and was comforted. So long as he could hear their passionate disputations he would never miss his life at the Commercial Bar.

He did rather wish they had been cleaner birds. Their nests were old and huge. Ramshackle and filthy. Filth himself was ostentatiously clean. His fingernails and toenails were pearly (chiropodist to the house every sixth week: twenty-five pounds a time), his hair still not grey but curly, autumnal bronze. His complexion shone and was scarcely lined. He smelled – rather excitingly – of Wright’s coal-tar soap, a commodity beginning to be rare in many parts of the country.

‘He must have had something to hide,’ said young barristers. ‘Something nasty in his wood shed.’ ‘What, Old Filth!’ they cried. ‘Impossible!’ They were of course wrong. Eddie Feathers QC had as much to hide as everybody else.

But whatever it was, it would have nothing to do with money. He never mentioned the stuff. He was a gentleman to the end. There must have been buckets of it somewhere. Bucket upon bucket upon bucket, thanks to the long, long international practice. And he spent nothing, or nothing much. Maybe a bit more than the mysterious Veneering next door. Filth was not a vain man. He strode about the lanes in expensive tweeds, but they were very old. Not much fun, but never pompous. If he ever brooded upon his well-organised millions, managed by impeccable brokers, he didn’t think



about them much. He joked about them occasionally. ‘Oh yes, I have “held the gorgeous East in fee”,’ he would say, ‘ha-ha’, quoting Sir, his headmaster.

He himself never went to the theatre or read poetry, for he wept too easily.

After a time a lethargy had fallen upon Filth. He lost the energy even to think about moving house. And maybe the old enemy up the slope had begun to feel the same. They never met. If occasionally they found themselves passing one another at a distance during an afternoon walk in the lanes, each looked away.

Then, after a year or so, something must have happened. It was never discussed, even in the village shop, but there were some astonishing sightings, sounds of old English accents, staccato in the bluebell woods. It happened over a snow-bound Christmas. Before long it was reported that the two old buffers were playing chess together on Thursdays. And when Terry Veneering died during a ridiculous jaunt – foot in a hole on a clifftop on the island of Malta and then thrombosis – Edward Feathers said, ‘Silly old fool. Far too old for that sort of thing. I told him so,’ but was surprised how much he missed him.

Yet he refused to attend Veneering’s memorial service at Temple Church in London. There would have been comment and Betty’s name bandied about. For all his Olympian manner, Old Filth was not histrionic. Never. He stayed alone at home that day, making notes on the new edition of *Hudson’s Building and Engineering Contracts* that he had



been (flatteringly, considering his age) asked to re-edit some years before. He had a whisky and a slice of ham for his supper and listened to the news. When he heard the returning cars of the village mourners passing the end of his lane from Tisbury Station he sensed disapproval at his absence like a wet cloth across the face; and turned a page.

Nobody came to see him that evening, not even sexy old Chloe who was never off his doorstep with shepherd's pies. Not his gardener nor his cleaning lady who had travelled to the memorial service in London and back together in the gardener's pick-up. Not Dulcie who lived near by on Privilege Hill and was just about his oldest friend, the widow of an endearing old Hong Kong judge dead years ago and much lamented. Dulcie was a tiny, rather stupid woman, and *grande dame* of the village.

'Let them think what they like,' said Old Filth into his double malt. 'I am past all these frivolities.'

But the next frivolity was to be his own, for the following Christmas he took himself off alone to the place of his birth, which he still called the Malay States, and died as he stepped off the plane.



## Chapter Two

And so, on a cold morning in March the Dorset village of Donhead St Ague was off to its second memorial service within a few months, the first having been for Veneering, the second for Filth, off to Temple Church again, waiting for the London train on Tisbury Station. In prime positions were a group of three and a group of four, all sombrely and correctly dressed but standing at different ends of the platform because although they were neighbours they were not yet exactly friends.

The group of four had recently bought Veneering's house, invisible from the road but known for its brashness and flamboyance and ugliness like its old owner and, like its old owner, keeping out of sight. They were father, mother, son and daughter, most *ordinary* people, it was said, though it was vaguely thought that the father was some sort of intellectual.

Waiting at the front end of the train was the elder of the village: old Dulcie the widow, with her daughter Susan and her twelve-year-old grandson Herman, an American child,

serious and very free with his opinions. Dulcie was half his size, a tiny woman in grey moleskin and a hat made of what could have been the feathers of the village rooks. It was a hat bought forty years ago in Bond Street for the Queen's birthday in Dar es Salaam, where Dulcie's husband had been an easygoing and contented judge even at a hanging.

Susan, Dulcie's stocky daughter, was a glum person, married to an invisible husband who seldom stirred from Boston, Massachusetts. Granny, mother and son were about to travel first class in reserved seats.

The group of four, who had never reserved a seat for anything in their lives, were stamping noisily about, waiting to fight their way into the last carriage, quite ready to stand all the way to Waterloo among the people who'd been down to Weymouth for the Bank Holiday and would be drunk or drugged or singing and drinking smoothies, some of the tattooed young men wearing dresses. These old Dulcie would somehow be spared. She had a heart murmur.

The group of three settled themselves in first class. Susan began to demolish the *Daily Telegraph* crossword, flung it from her completed within minutes and said, 'I don't know why we're going. We're hardly over Veneering's.'

'Oh, I am,' said Dulcie. 'I quite enjoyed it.'

'It's not good for you, Ma. All this death. At your age.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Dulcie. 'It keeps people in touch.'

'I'm not keen on touching people.'

'I know, dear,' said Dulcie, looking at her grandson and wondering how ever he had come into the world.

'I don't suppose there'll be anyone there we'll even



remember, you know. Filth was much older than you. You married from the schoolroom.'

'Did I? Good gracious,' said Dulcie.

'Ma,' said Susan, and amazingly touched her mother's hand, 'you mustn't be upset if there's nobody much there. At his age. Veneering was younger.'

But surprisingly the church was full. There were young people there – whoever were they? – and people who didn't look at all like lawyers. Groups seemed to be arranging themselves in tribes, nodding and smiling at each other. Some stared with polite surprise, some with distaste. There was a dwarf. Well, of course. He'd been Filth's instructing solicitor for decades – but surely he was dead? Here he was, legs stuck out in front of him, face creased like an old nut, vast brown felt hat on his knee and sitting in one of the lateral seats reserved for Benchers only. And refusing to move.

The intellectual family man whispered to his wife that the dwarf was a celebrity, to tell the children to look at him. 'Must be a hundred. They will tell their grandchildren. Said to have been dead ten times over. Had some sort of power over Filth.' The two children looked unimpressed and the little girl asked if the Queen would be coming.

There was a pew full of generations of a family with the queer pigmentation of ex-pats. Britons – a pale cheese colour, like Wensleydale. There was a row of Straits Chinese and some Japanese who were being reprimanded about their mobile phones. There was a huge sad man rambling about at the back of the church near the medieval knights who lay



on the floor with broken swords and noses. ‘Barristers?’ asked the children, but the intellectual father wasn’t sure. The old man was silently refusing to be moved to a more distinguished seat, it having been discovered that he’d once been a Vice-Chancellor.

There was Old Filth’s gardener and cleaning lady, who had parked the pick-up in the Temple this time round and had just finished a slap-up lunch at the Cheshire Cheese in the Strand. And there was a very, very old, tall woman, just arriving, sliding in among the Orientals, in a long silk coat – pale rose pink – as the choir and organ set to on the opening hymn.

‘I’ll bet that was his mistress,’ said the intellectual.

‘More likely it’s her ghost,’ said his wife.

And then they all began to sing ‘I Vow to Thee My Country’, which, for Old Filth, born on the Black River in the jungles of Malaysia, wrapped in the arms of a childish *ayah*, happily rocked by the night sounds of water and trees and invisible creatures and watched over by different gods, had never been England anyway.

## Chapter Three

After the service old Dulcie found that she didn't want to stay long at the gathering in Parliament Chamber across Temple Yard. Talk had broken into chorus as they all streamed out. Conversation swelled. The dwarf was being waved off in a splendid car, tossing his hat to the crowd like a hero. Streams of guests were passing up the steps of Inner Temple Hall and towards the champagne. Dulcie clutched Susan's arm; then, inside the chamber, observed people looking uncertainly at each other before plunging. She watched them watching each other furtively, from a distance. She examined – and recognised – the degrees of enthusiasm as they asked a name. She saw some things that had worried her lately. And so much going on besides that she seemed to be seeing for the first time, or analysing for the first time, though she knew that it was everyday, as habitual as looking at the clock or holding out a hand. Yet whatever did it mean?

She was sure that she knew any number of the looming, talkative, exclaiming faces, if she could only brush away the

threads and lines that now veiled them. And the curious papery dried-out skin! 'I'm afraid it was all our *cigarettes*,' she said to someone passing by in pale pink silk. The woman immediately melted off-stage. Over in a corner, rowdy people seemed to be passing around the dwarf's hat and a cheer went up. 'Cowboys,' she said. 'It is like a saloon.' She moved towards the lovely long windows, hearing everywhere half-familiar voices and names of old friends lamented for being long gone.

But they were not long gone to her. Oh, never! Since schooldays, and just like her mother, Dulcie had kept all her address books and birthday books and a tattered pre-war autograph book. Some of the names, of course, were hazy on the page. Some were firmly crossed out by Susan. ('But there were *always* Vansittarts at Wingfield.' 'Susan, do *not* cross that out. I'll be sending a Christmas card.') I must learn this email, she thought. Tomorrow. 'Susan – could we go home?'

Susan fetched her mother's coat. Naturally Dulcie had kept her hat on. It made for a pleasant, feathery shadow but she had a wish that she were of this generation (who would have left a hat in the cloakroom) and shown that she wasn't going thin on top like most of them; but she didn't quite dare. Her fur coat was expensive and light as wool and smelled of Evening in Paris, setting the odd old nostril quivering as she passed.

A taxi had been called for Waterloo Station and the train home, and Herman was being hunted down. Large and grave, the boy stood looking towards the Thames across

Temple Gardens, 'where,' he told his grandmother, 'as I guess you know, they organised the Wars of the Roses.'

'Such lovely lime juice,' said Dulcie, 'and *how* we missed it in the war.'

Herman glowered, saying that clearly only Americans were historians now.

'They have so little of it to learn,' said Dulcie.

'Romantic vista?' asked the ex-Vice-Chancellor, plodding by. 'Hello, Dulcie. I am Cumberledge. Eddie and I were lads together in Wales.'

'Magnificent,' said Dulcie. 'They call it Cumbria now. So affected. Herman darling, I do think it's time to go.'

'The Thames once stank so much they had to move out of the House of Commons,' said Herman.

'Quite a stink there sometimes now,' said a new Queen's Counsel, going by with tipping wineglass.

'I think you should qualify that,' said Herman, but the silk had faded away. 'Granny, nobody's talking to me.'

'Why should they?'

'And there's no music.'

'Well, I don't think Old Filth was – big – on music, darling.'

'Veneering was. I liked Mr Veneering better anyway.'

'So you always say,' said his grandmother. 'I don't know how you know anything about him. And he was Sir Terence. Sir Terry Veneering.'

'Granny, I was nine. He was at your house. His hair was like threads and queer yellow. He played the blues on your piano. Granny, you *must* remember. There was an awful

man there too, called Winston Smith or something. Like 1984. I hope the Winston Smith one's past it, like most of these here. Why's Mr Veneering dead? He noticed me. I'll bet he was an American. They never forget you, Americans. Filthy Feathers' ('Sir Edward,' said Dulcie) 'never had a clue who I was.'

'Taxi now, Herman. Stop talking.'

A little old man seemed to be accompanying them as they left the party.

She had seen him in the church with a second-class railway ticket sticking up from his breast pocket.

When they climbed into their waiting taxi, he climbed in with them. 'Dulcie,' he said, 'I am Fiscal-Smith.'

The name, the face, had been at the rim of Dulcie's perception all day, like the faint trail of light from a dead planet. Fiscal-Smith!

'But,' she said, 'you told me you were never coming to London again after Veneering's party. I mean Memorial. Don't you live somewhere quite North?'

'Good early train. Darlington,' he said. 'My ghillie drove me down from the Hall. Two hours King's Cross. Excellent.'

'What's a ghillie?' asked Herman.

'You know, Dulcie, that I never miss a memorial service. I wouldn't come down for anything else. Well, perhaps for an Investiture . . . And you'll remember, I think, that I *was* Old Filth's best man. In Hong Kong. You were there. With Willy.'

'Yes,' said Dulcie – after a pause – her eyes glazing, remembering with terrible clarity that Veneering, of course, had not been present. Not in the flesh.



Fiscal-Smith was never exactly one of us, she thought. No one knows a thing about him now. Jumped up from nowhere. Like Veneering. On the make all his life. In a minute he's going to ask to come back to Dorset with us for a free bed-and-breakfast. He'll be asking me to marry him next.

'I'm nearly eighty-three,' she said, confusing him.

He took his Cheap Day second-class rail ticket from his pocket and read it through. 'I was just thinking,' he said, 'I might come back with you to Dorset? Stay a few nights? Old times? Talk about Willy? Maybe a week? Or two? Possibility?'

In the train he sat down at once in Herman's reserved seat. 'That,' said Herman, 'is not legal.'

'Justice,' said Fiscal-Smith, 'has nothing to do with Law.'

'Well you'll have to help me to get Mother out,' said Susan. 'Tisbury has a big drop.'

'I wouldn't mind a big drop now,' said Fiscal-Smith, 'or even a small one. Will there be a trolley?'

There was not. The journey was tedious. Fiscal-Smith had trouble with the ticket inspector, who was slow to admit that you have a right to a first-class seat with only the return half of a basic Fun Day Special to another part of the country. Fiscal-Smith won the case, as he had been known to do before, through relentless wearing-down of the defence, who went shakily off through the rattletrap doors. 'Ridiculous man. Quite untrained,' said Fiscal-Smith.

The train stopped at last at Tisbury, waiting in the wings for the down-line train to hurtle by. 'Excellent management,'



said Fiscal-Smith as they drew up on the platform and the usual *Titanic*-style evacuation took place from its eccentric height, passengers leaping into the air and hoping to be caught. ‘Very dangerous,’ said Fiscal-Smith. ‘Very well known hazard, this line. “Every man for himself.”’ He then completely disappeared.

Dulcie and Susan were rescued by the intellectual family man, who came running up the platform to take Dulcie in his arms and lift her down.

‘How well you can run,’ she said to him. ‘Your legs are as long as dear Edward’s. An English gentleman could always be identified by his long legs, you know, once. Though in old age they all became rather floppy in the shanks.’ Seeing suddenly Old Filth’s rotting remains in the English cemetery in Dacca and nobody to put flowers on them, her pale eyes filled with tears. Everyone gone now, she thought. Nobody left.

‘Come on back with us,’ said the family man. ‘It’s a foul night. I’ll drop you at home. We have a car rug.’

But she said, ‘No, the family had better stay together. You can have Fiscal-Smith,’ she added, which he seemed not to hear.

Fiscal-Smith had already found Susan’s old Morris Traveller in the car park and was fussing round it.

‘Well, keep our lights in view,’ called the family man, who was at once invisible through the murk and lashing rain.

As Susan drove carefully along behind, they all fell silent. They passed Old Filth’s empty house, in its hollow, but Dulcie didn’t peer down at it. She thought of his steady

friendship and noble soul. What Fiscal-Smith was thinking it was hard to say. The car swished through lakes of rain in the road, the deluge and the dark. Dulcie looked straight ahead.

They began to speak again only as they reached Dulcie's stately home on Privilege Hill, where in minutes lights blazed, central heating and hot water were turned up higher, soup, bread and cheese appeared and the telly was switched on for the news.

The smell of deep-blue hyacinths in bowls set heads spinning, and the polished blackness of the windows before the curtains were drawn across showed that the wet and starless world had passed into infinite space. Dulcie thought again about the last scene of the last act.

'Why were all the lights on in his house?' asked Herman.

'Whose house? Filth's?' said Susan. 'They weren't. It's been locked up since Christmas. Chains on the gates.'

'Didn't notice the gates,' said the grandson, 'but the lights were on all over it. In every room. Shining like always. But there seemed to be more than usual. Every window blazing.'

'I expect it has caught fire,' said Fiscal-Smith, searching out Dulcie's drinks cupboard, as old friends are permitted to do.