

Jane Gardam

Old Filth

“Jane Gardam’s beautiful, vivid and defiantly funny novel is a must.”—*The Times*



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OLD FILTH



*Lawyers, I suppose, were
children once*

(Inscription upon the statue of a child
in the Inner Temple Garden in London)

To Raj Orphans
and their parents

PART ONE

The Benchers' luncheon-room of the Inner Temple. Light pours through the long windows upon polished table, silver, glass. A number of Judges and Benchers finishing lunch. One chair has recently been vacated and the Benchers are looking at it.

The Queen's Remembrancer: I suppose we all know who that was?

Junior judge: I've no idea.

Senior judge: It seemed to be a famous face.

The Common Sergeant: It was Old Filth.

JJ: *What!* But he must have died years ago. Contemporary of F. E. Smith.

CS: No. It was Old Filth. Great advocate, judge and—bit of a wit. Said to have invented FILTH—Failed In London Try Hong Kong. He tried Hong Kong. Modest, nice chap.

SJ: Hard worker. Well—the Pollution Law. Feathers on Pollution.

CS: Filth on Filth.

SJ: An old joke. He must be a hundred.

CS: Nowhere near. He's not been retired all that long. Looks a great age, though.

QR: Transparent. You could see the light through him.

CS: Magnificent looks, though. And still sharp.

QR: He's up here doing things to his Will. He's got Betty with him. She's still alive too. They've had a soft life. Far Eastern Bar. And made a packet. Looked after themselves.

CS: Never put a foot wrong, Old Filth. Very popular.

QR: Except with Veneering.

SJ: Yes, that was odd. Out of character.

QR: For such a benevolent old bugger. D'you think there are mysteries?

SJ: Old Filth mysterious?

QR: It's a wonder he's not just a bore.

CS: Yes. But he's not. Child of the Raj, public school, Oxford, the Bar—but he's not a bore. Women went mad for him.

QR: Coffee? You going through?

CS: Yes. Ten minutes. My Clerk's packing in the next case. He'll be ranting at me. Tapping his watch.

QR: Yes. This isn't Hong Kong. Coffee? But it was good to see the old coelacanth.

CS: Yes. Yes, indeed it was. Tell our grandchildren.

He was spectacularly clean. You might say ostentatiously clean. His ancient fingernails were rimmed with purest white. The few still-gold hairs below his knuckles looked always freshly shampooed, as did his curly still-bronze hair. His shoes shone like conkers. His clothes were always freshly pressed. He had the elegance of the 1920s, for his garments, whatever they looked like off, always became him. Always a Victorian silk handkerchief in the breast pocket. Always yellow cotton or silk socks from Harrods; and some still perfect from his old days in the East. His skin was clear and, in a poor light, young.

His colleagues at the Bar called him Filth, but not out of irony. It was because he was considered to be the source of the old joke, Failed In London Try Hong Kong. It was said that he had fled the London Bar, very young, very poor, on a sudden whim just after the War, and had done magnificently well in Hong Kong from the start. Being a modest man, they said, he had called himself a parvenu, a fraud, a carefree spirit.

Filth in fact was no great maker of jokes, was not at all modest about his work and seldom, except in great extremity, went in for whims. He was loved, however, admired, laughed at kindly and still much discussed many years after retirement.

Now, nearing eighty, he lived alone in Dorset. His wife Betty was dead but he often prattled on to her around the house. Astonishingly in one so old, his curly hair was not yet grey. His eyes and mind alert, he was a delightful man. He had always been thought so. A man whose distinguished life had run steadily and happily. There was no smell of old age about his house. He was rich and took for granted that it (and he) would be kept clean, fed and laundered by servants as it had always been. He knew how to treat servants and they stayed for years.

Betty had been successful with servants, too. Both she and Old Filth had been born in what Americans called the Orient and the British Raj had called the Far East. They knew who they were, but they were unselfconscious and popular.

After Betty's death the self-mockery dwindled in Old Filth. His life exploded. He became more ponderous. He began, at first slowly, to flick open shutters on the past that he had, as a sensible man with sensible and learned friends (he was a QC and had been a judge), kept clamped down.

His success as an advocate in Hong Kong had been phenomenal for he had had ease, grace, diligence and flair. His career had taken off the minute he had begun to be briefed by the Straits Chinese. It was not just that scraps of eastern languages began to re-emerge from his childhood in Malaya, but a feeling of nearness to the Oriental mind. When Old Filth spoke Malay or (less ably) Mandarin, you heard an unsuspected voice. Chinese, Malay and Bengali lawyers—though often trained at Oxford and the Inns of Court—were thought to be not straightforward but Filth, now Old Filth and after his retirement often Dear Old Filth, had found them perfectly straightforward, and to his taste.

All his life he kept a regard for Chinese values: the courtesy, the sudden thrust, the holiness of hospitality, the pleasure in money, the decorum, the importance of food, the cleverness. He had married a Scotswoman but she had been born in Peking. She was dumpy and tweedy with broad Lanarkshire shoulders and square hands, but she spoke Mandarin perfectly and was much more at home with Chinese ways and idiom than she ever felt on her very rare visits to Scotland. Her passion for jewellery was Chinese and her strong Scottish fingers rattled the trays of jade in the street.

markets of Kowloon, stirring the stones like pebbles on a beach. “When you do that,” Old Filth would say—when they were young and he was still aware of her all the time—“your eyes are almost shaped.” “Poor Old Betty,” he would say to her ghost across in another armchair in the house in Dorset to which they had retired and in which she had died.

And why ever Dorset? Nobody knew. Some family tradition somewhere perhaps. Filth said it was because he disliked everywhere else in England, Betty because she felt the cold in Scotland. They both had a dismissive attitude towards Wales.

But if any old pair had been born to become retired ex-pats in Hong Kong, members of the Cricket Club, the Jockey Club, stalwarts of the English Lending Library, props of St. Andrew’s Church and St. John’s Cathedral, they were Filth and Betty. People who would always be able to keep servants (Filth was very rich), who would live in a house on The Peak, be forever welcoming hosts to every friend and a friend’s friend visiting the Colony. When you thought of Betty, you saw her at her round rosewood dining table, looking quickly about her to see if plates were empty, tinkling her little bell to summon the snakey smiling girls in their household livery of identical cheongsams. Old Filth and Betty were perfectly international people, beloved ornaments at every one of the Memorial Services to old friends, English or Chinese, in the Cathedral. In the last years these deaths had been falling thick and fast upon them.

Was it perhaps “The Pound” that drew them to Dorset? The thought of having to survive one day in Hong Kong on a pension? But the part of Dorset they had chosen was far from cheap. Betty was known to “have her own money” and Filth had always said merrily that he had put off making judge for as long as possible so that he hadn’t to live on a salary.

And they had no children. No responsibilities. No one to come back to England for.

Or was it—the most likely thing—the end of Empire? The drawing-near of 1997? Was it the unbearableness of the thought of the arrival of the barbarians? The now unknown, but certainly changed, Mainland-Chinese whose grandparents had fed the baby Miss Betty on soft, cloudy jellies and told her frightening fairy tales?

Neither Filth nor Betty cared for the unknown and already, five years before they left, English was not being heard so much in Hong Kong shops and hotels and, when it was heard, it was being spoken less well. Many familiar English and Chinese had disappeared to London or Seattle or Toronto, and many children had vanished to foreign boarding schools. The finest of the big houses on The Peak were in darkness behind steel grilles, and at Betty’s favourite jeweller the little girls behind the counter, who sat all day threading beads and who still seemed to look under sixteen although she had known them twenty years, glanced up more slowly now when she rang the bell on the armour-plated door. They kept their fixed smiles but somehow found fewer good stones for her. Chinese women she knew had not the same difficulty.

So suddenly Filth and Betty were gone, gone for ever from the sky-high curtains of glittering light, unflickering gold, soft-green and rose, from the busy waters of the finest harbour in the world and the perpetual drama of every sort of boat: the junks and oil tankers and the private yachts like swans, and the comforting, bottle-green bulk of the little Star Ferries that chugged back and forth to Kowloon all day and most of the night. *This deck accommodates 319 passengers.* Filth had loved the certainty of the 19.

So they were gone, far from friends and over seventy, to a house deep in the Donheads on the Dorset-Wiltshire border, an old low stone house that could not be seen from its gate. A rough, narrow drive climbed up to it, curving towards it and out of sight. The house sat on a small plateau looking down over forests of every sort and colour of English tree, and far across the horizon was a low

scalpel line of milky, chalky downland, dappled with shadows drawn across it by the clouds. No place in the world is less like Hong Kong or the Far East.

Yet it was not so remote that a doctor might start suggesting in a few years' time that it might be kinder to the Social Services if they were to move nearer to civilisation. There was a village half a mile up the hilly road that passed their gate, and half a mile in the other direction, also up a hill from their drive ran down into a dip, were a church and a shop. There were other houses among the trees. There was even a house next door, its gateway alongside theirs, its drive curving upwards as did their own, though branching away. It disappeared, as did their own. So they were secluded but not cut off.

And it worked. They made it work. Betty was the sort of woman who had plotted that the end of her life would work, and Filth, having Betty, had no fears of failure. They changed of course. They discarded much. They went out and about very little. Betty wrote a great many letters. They put their hearts into becoming content, safe in their successful lives. Filth had always said—of his Cases—“I am trained to forget.” “Otherwise,” he said, “how could I function?” Facts, memories, the pain of lives—of lives in chaos—have to be forgotten. Filth had condemned men to death. Had seen innocent men convicted. As a Silk he reckoned that fifty per cent of his Cases had gone wrong. In Hong Kong the judges lived in an enclave of palaces but behind steel gates guarded night and day.

In The Donheads they felt safe behind the lock of their old-fashioned farmhouse door that could never accidentally be left on the latch. Betty gardened, Filth read thrillers and biographies, worked now and then in his tool shed. He kept his judge's wig in its oval black-and-gold tin box on the heart of a grey cat in a basket. Then in time, as there was nobody but Betty to be amused, he moved it to his wardrobe to lie with his black silk stockings and buckled shoes. He had not brought the Black Cat home.

Betty sat sewing. She often stared for hours at the trees. They went to the supermarket at Shaftesbury once a week in their modest car. A gardener came to do the heavy digging and a woman from a nearby village came in four times a week to clean, cook and do the laundry. Betty said that Hong Kong's legacy was to make foreigners unable to do their own washing. After Betty died, the gardener and the woman continued to work for Filth. Filth's lifetime of disciplined charm survived well.

Or so it seemed. Looking back, Filth knew that beneath his apparent serenity the years after Betty's departure had been a time of mental breakdown and that mental breakdown in someone conditioned for an actor's life (which is the Bar) can be invisible both to the sufferer and everyone else.

And this—the event he came to see as the beginning of enlightenment—occurred one Christmas two years on. The cleaning lady started it.

Letting herself in with her door-key, talking as usual before she was over the threshold, “Well,” she said. “What about this then, Sir Edward? You never hear a thing down this way till it's happened. Next door must have moved. Your next door. There's removal vans all up and down the drive and loads of new stuff being carried in. They say it's another lawyer from Singapore like you.”

“Hong Kong,” corrected Filth, as he always did.

“Hong Kong then. They'll be wanting a domestic I dare say, but they're out of luck. I'm well-suited here, you're not to worry. I'll find them someone if they ask. I've enough to do.”

A few days later Filth was told, courtesy of the village shop, the new neighbour's name. It was, as the cleaning lady had said, indeed that of another Hong Kong lawyer and it was the name of the one man in his professional life, or come to that his private life, that Old Filth had ever detested. The

extraordinary effect this man had had upon him over many years, and it had been much remarked upon and the usually buttoned-up Filth had not cared, was like venom sprayed from the mouths of Chinese dragons.

And the same had gone for Terry Veneering's opinion of Old Filth.

Betty had never spoken of it. Kept herself apart. Became silent, remote. Filth's Clerk, other lawyer found the enmity almost a chemical, physical thing. In Hong Kong, the Bar watched. Old Filth and delightful wise Old Filth and swashbuckling Veneering, did not "have words" in Court, they spoke of poisons. They did not cross swords, they set about each other with scimitars. Old Filth believed that Terry Veneering was all that was wrong with the British masters of this divine Colony—jumped-up, arrogant, blustering, loud, cynical and common. And far too good at games. Without such a Veneering—who knows? Veneering treated the Chinese as if they were invisible, flung himself into pompous rites of Empire, strutted at ceremonies in his black and gold, cringed with sycophancy before the Governor, drank too much. In Court he treated his opponent to personal abuse. Once, when they were both still Counsel in an interminable case about a housing estate built over a Chinese graveyard (the housing estate mysteriously refused to prosper), Veneering spent days sneering at primitive beliefs. Or so Old Filth said in, and out of, Court. What Veneering said about Old Filth he never enquired but there was a mutual, seething dislike. Betty became haggard with the subject.

For Veneering got away with everything, snarled Filth. He bestrode the Colony on his thick legs like a colossus, booming on at parties about his own excellence. During a state visit by royalty he boasted about his boy at Eton. Later it was all "my boy at Cambridge," then "my boy in the Guards." "Insufferable," cried Filth. Betty said, "Oh, hush, hush."

Filth's first thought—now—was: Well, thank God Betty's gone. His second thought was that he would have to move.

However, the next-door house was as invisible as Filth's, its garden secret behind the long band of firs that curved between their joint drives. These trees grew broader, taller, all the time, and even when the leaves of other trees fell and it became winter, there was neither sight nor sound of the next neighbour.

"He's a widower, living alone," said the cleaning lady. "His wife used to be a Chinese."

Old Filth remembered then that Veneering had married a Chinese woman. Strange to have forgotten. Why did it stir up in him such a mixture of hatred and smugness—almost of relief? He remembered the wife now, her downward-looking eyes, the curious chandelier earrings she wore. He remembered her at the racecourse in a bright yellow silk dress, Veneering alongside—great coarse golden fellow, six foot two; his strangled voice trying to sound English public school.

Old Filth dozed off then with this picture before him, wondering at the clarity of an image thirty years old when what happened yesterday had receded into darkness. He was nearly eighty now. Veneering was a bit younger. Well, they could each keep their own corner. They need never meet.

Nor did they. The year went by and the next one. A friend from Hong Kong—young chap of sixty—called and said, "I believe old Terry Veneering lives somewhere down here, too. Do you ever come across him?"

"He's next door. No. Never."

"Next door? My dear fellow—!"

"I'd have been wise to move away."

“But you mean you’ve never—?”

“No.”

“And he’s made no . . . gesture?”

“Christopher, your memory is short.”

“Well, I knew of course you were . . . You were both irrational in that direction, but . . .”

Old Filth walked his friend down to the gate. Beside it stood Veneering’s gate, overhung by ragged eaves. A short length of drainpipe, to take a morning newspaper, was attached to Veneering’s gate. It was identical to the one that had lain by Old Filth’s gate for many years. “He copied my drainpipe,” said Old Filth. “He never had an original notion.”

“I’ve half a mind to call,” said Christopher.

“Well, you needn’t come and see me again if you do,” said courteous Old Filth.

Seated in his car in the road the friend considered the mystery of what convictions survive in a world of dotage and how wise he had been to stay on in Hong Kong.

“You don’t feel like a visit, Eddie?” he asked out of the car window. “Why not come out for Christmas? It’s not so much changed that there’ll ever be anywhere in the world like it.”

But Filth said he never stirred at Christmas. Just a taxi to the White Hart at Salisbury, for luncheon. Good place. No paper hats. No streamers.

“I remember Betty with streamers tangled up in her hair and her pearls and gold chains. In Hong Kong.”

But Filth thanked him and declined and waved him off.

On Christmas morning, Filth thought again of Christopher, as he was waiting for the taxi to the White Hart, watching from a window whose panes were almost blocked with snow, snow that had been falling when he’d opened his bedroom curtains five hours ago at seven o’clock. Big, fast, determined flakes. They fell and fell. They danced. They mesmerised. After a few moments you couldn’t tell if they were going up or down. Thinking of the road at the end of his drive, the deep hollow there, he wondered if the taxi would make it. At twelve-fifteen he thought he might ring and ask, but waited until twelve-thirty as it seemed tetchy to fuss. He discovered the telephone was dead.

“Ah,” he said. “Ha.”

There were mince pies and a ham shank. A good bottle somewhere. He’d be all right. A pity though. Break with tradition.

He stood staring at the Christmas cards. Fewer again this year. As for presents, nothing except one from his cousin Claire. Always the same. Two handkerchiefs. More than he ever sent her, but she had the pearls. He must send her some flowers. He picked up one large glossy card and read *A Merry Christmas from The Ideal Tailor, Century Arcade, Star Building, Hong Kong to an old and esteemed client*. Every year. Never failed. Still had his suits. Twenty years old. He wore them sometimes in summer. Snowflakes danced around a Chinese house on stilts. Red Chinese characters. A rosy Father Christmas waving from a corner. Stilts. Houses on stilts.

Suddenly he missed Betty. Longed for her. Felt that if he turned round now, quickly, there she would be.

But she was not.

Outside there was a strange sound, a long, sliding noise and a thump. A heavy thump. It might well be the taxi skidding on the drive and hitting the side of the house. Filth opened the front door but saw nothing but snow. He stepped quickly out upon his doorstep to look down the drive, and behind him

the front door swung to, fastening with a solid, pre-War click.

He was in his bedroom slippers. Otherwise he was dressed in trousers, a singlet—which he always wore, being a gentleman, thank God—shirt and tie and the thin cashmere cardigan Betty had bought him years ago. Already it was sopped through.

Filth walked delicately along the side of the house in his slippers, bent forward, screwing his eyes against the snow, to see if by any chance . . . but he knew that the back door was locked, and the French windows. He turned off towards the tool shed over the invisible slippery grass. Locked. He thought of the car in the garage. He hadn't driven now for some time, not since the days of terror. Mr. Thing did the shopping now. It was scarcely used. But perhaps the garage—?

The garage was locked.

Nothing for it but to get down the drive somehow and wait for the taxi under Veneering's yews.

In his tiptoe way he passed the heap of snow that had fallen off the roof and had sounded like a slithering car. "I'm a bloody old fool," he said.

From the gate he looked out upon the road. It was a gleaming sheet of snow in both directions. Nothing had disturbed it for many hours. All was silent, as death. Filth turned and looked up Veneering's drive.

That too was pristine silk, unmarked by birds, unpocked by fallen berries. Snow and snow. Falling and falling. Thick, wet, ice cold. His thinning hair ice cold. Snow had gathered inside his collar, his cardigan, his slippers. All ice cold. His knobby hands were freezing as he grasped first one yew branch and then the next. Hand over hand he made his way up Veneering's drive.

He'll be with the son, thought Old Filth. That or there'll be some ghastly house party going on. Golfers. Old cobwebs from the Temple. Smart solicitors. Gin.

But the house when it came in view was dark and seemed empty. Abandoned for years.

Old Filth rang the bell and stood on the porch. The bell tinkled somewhere far away inside, like Betty's at the rosewood dining-table in the Mid Levels.

And what the hell do I do now? He's probably gone to that oaf Christopher and they are carousing at the Peninsular Hotel. It'll be—what? Late night now. They'll have reached the brandy and cigars—the cigars presented in a huge shallow box, the maître d' bowing like a priest before the sacrament. The vulgarities. Probably kill the pair of them. Hulloo?

A light had been switched on inside the house and a face peered from behind a curtain in a side window. Then the front door was opened slightly by a bent old man with a strand or two of blond hair.

"Filth? Come in."

"Thank you."

"No coat?"

"I just stepped across. I was looking out for my taxi. For the White Hart. Christmas luncheon. Just hanging about. I thought I'd call and . . ."

"Merry Christmas. Good of you."

They stood in the drear, unhollied hall.

"I'll get you a towel. Better take off your cardigan. I'll find you another. Whiskey?"

In the brown and freezing sitting-room a jigsaw puzzle only one-eighth completed was laid out over a huge table. Table and jigsaw were both white with dust. The venture looked hopeless.

"Too much damned sky," said Veneering as they stood contemplating it. "I'll put another bar on. I don't often sit in here. You must be cold. Maybe we'll hear your car from here, but I doubt it. I guess it won't get through."

"I wonder if I might use your phone? Mine seemed to be defunct."

“Mine too, I’d guess, if yours is,” said Veneering. “By all means try.”

The phone was dead.

They sat before two small, red wire-worms stretched across the front of an electric fire. Some sort of antique, thought Filth. Haven’t seen one like that in sixty years. Chambers in the years of the Great Fog.

In a display case on the chimney-piece he saw a pair of exotic chandelier earrings. The fire, the earrings, the whiskey, the jigsaw, the silence, the eerily-falling snow made him all at once want to weep.

“I was sorry to hear about Betty,” said Veneering.

“I was sorry about Elsie,” said Filth, remembering her name and her still and beautiful—an unhappy—Chinese face. “Your son—?”

“Dead,” said Veneering. “Killed. Army.”

“I am most terribly sorry. So dreadfully sorry. I hadn’t heard.”

“We don’t hear much these days,” said Veneering. “Maybe we don’t want to. We had too many Hearings.”

Filth watched the arthritic stooped old figure shamble across the room to the decanter.

“Not good for the bones, this climate,” said Veneering, shambling back.

“Did you think of staying on?”

“Good God, no.”

“It suited you so well.” Then Filth said something very odd. “Better than us, I always thought. Better than me, anyway. And Betty never talked about it. She was very Scotch, you know.”

“Plenty of Scots in Hong Kong,” said Veneering. “You two seemed absolutely welded, melded, into the place. Betty and her Chinese jewellery.”

“Oh, she tried,” said Filth sadly. “She was very faithful.”

“Another?”

“I should be getting home.”

It dawned on Old Filth that he would have to ask a favour of Veneering. He had already lost a good point to him by calling round wet to the skin. Veneering was still no fool. He’d spotted the telephone business. It would be difficult to regain his position. Maybe make something out of being the first to break the silence? Maturity. Magnanimity. Water under the bridge. Christmas Day. Hint at a large spirit?

He wouldn’t mention locking himself out.

But how was he to get home? Mrs. Thing’s key was three miles off and she wasn’t coming in again until New Year’s Day. He could hardly stay here—Good God! With Veneering!

“I’ve thought of coming to see you,” said Veneering. “Several times as a matter of fact, this past year. Getting on, both of us.”

Old Filth was silent. He himself had not thought of doing anything of the sort, and could not pretend.

“Couldn’t think of a good excuse,” said Veneering. “Bit afraid of the reception. Bloody hot tempered type, I used to be. We weren’t exactly similar.”

“I’ve forgotten what type I was,” said Filth, again surprising himself. “Not much of anything, expect.”

“Bloody good advocate,” said Veneering.

“You made a damn good judge,” said Filth, remembering that this was true. “Better than I was.”

“~~Only excuse I could think of was a feeble one,~~” said Veneering. “There’s a key of yours here hanging in my pantry. Front door. Chubb. Your address is on the label. Must have been here for years. Neighbours being neighbourly long ago, I expect. Maybe you have one of mine?”

“No,” said Filth. “No, I’ve not seen one.”

“Could have let myself in, any time,” said Veneering. “Murdered you in your bed.” There was a flash of the old black mischief. “Must you go? I don’t think there’s going to be a taxi. It would never make the hill. I’ll get that key—unless you want me to hold on to it. For an emergency?” (Another hard look.)

“No,” said Filth with Court decorum. “No, I’ll take it and see if it works.”

On Veneering’s porch, wearing Veneering’s (ghastly) over-coat, Filth paused. The snow was easing. He heard himself say, “Boxing Day tomorrow. If you’re on your own, I’ve a ham shank and some decent claret.”

“Pleasure,” said Veneering.

On his own doorstep Filth thought: Will it turn?

It did.

The house was beautifully warm but he made up the fire. The water would be hot, thank God. Got out of these clothes. Hello? What?

He thought he heard something in the kitchen. Hello? Yes?

He went through and found it empty. The snow had stopped at last and the windows were squares of black light. He thought, peering forward into the gloaming: Someone is looking in. But he could see no signs of footprints anywhere, and drew the curtains. He peeped into cupboards to make sure of things for tomorrow. Didn’t want to look a fool. There was a can of shark’s fin soup. Tin of crab-meat. Good rice. Package of parmesan. Avocado. Fine. Fine.

Behind him in the hall he heard something like a chuckle.

“Who the hell is that? Hello?” (Had the fellow had two keys? *Murdered you in your bed.*)

“Edward, Edward, stop these fantasies! You are too old. You are no longer seven.” A man’s voice. Good God, I’m going senile. “Yes, Sir,” he said. “Kettle. Hot water bottle. Bath. I’m old.”

The phone rang.

“You back safely?” asked Veneering’s voice. “I thought I’d try the phone. We’re in touch again.”

“Oh. Thanks, Veneering. One o’clock tomorrow?”

“Yes. Would you like me to bring my chessmen?”

“Got some. Maybe next time.”

“Next time.”

So it wasn’t Veneering, he ruminated in the bath, idly watching his old greying pubic hair floating like fern on the delicious hot water. Steam filled the bathroom. He almost slept.

Better get out. Somehow. Or it’ll be all over.

He turned his lanky frame so that he was on all fours, facing the porcelain floor of the bath, balanced on his spread hands and his sharp knees (one of them none too excellent), and slithered his feet about to get some sort of purchase near the taps. Slowly the long length of him arose, feet squeaking a little. He pulled the plug out and watched the soapy water begin to drain, bubbling round his now rosy feet. He thought of another river. Black and brown babies splashing. A girl all warmth and laughter, his head against her thighs. The water gurgled away.

Getting more difficult. Must get a shower. Won't have one of those bloody mats with suction pads though. Won't have what they call the Social Services. Veneering doesn't, you can see. Mind Veneering doesn't look as if he has baths at all. Poor old bugger.

Wrapped in a white bath towel he padded about. Slippers, bath robe. Perfectly well. Take a little something to bed? No— eat it over the telly? Anchovy toast. Tea—enough whiskey. Ha!—blaze up the fire. Mustn't drop off.

“Don't drop off,” said a woman's voice. “Don't drop off the perch! Not yet.”

“Hey, hello, what? Betty?”

But again, nobody there.

Hope I'm not feverish.

“And I'm not being a fool,” he shouted to the door of Betty's old bedroom and shut his own bedroom door behind him.

Perfectly in charge.

The bed was warm, and his own. Extraordinary really, the idea of sharing a bed. Bourgeois. Something Betty and I never talked about.

“This is not the time of frenzy,” he heard himself say out loud as the images of the day merged into dreams. He was clinging to someone on a boat-deck and the sea a silver skin. There was screaming but it was somewhere else and hardly woke him. “We dealt with all that,” he said, “in what they call my long, untroubled and uneventful life.”

“Sleep, Filth,” said a voice. “Nobody knew you like I did.”

Which of them said that? he wondered.

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Auntie May of the Baptist Mission, striding up the gangplank. “Now then, he we are. Excellent.”

The motor launch, now and then trying its engine to see whether it would be safe to let it die, stirred the black water around it, rocked and snorted. All across the wide river, small waves slapped and tipped. Heat seemed to drip from the trees like oil. It was summer, the monsoon coming, and when it did the river traffic would die. This was why they were getting the baby home at only one week old. Otherwise he would have been stranded in the Port where he had gone to be born. Here they were, safely home, but it had been a near thing. A two-day journey and Auntie May, after she had seen him safely to his father’s house, would have to make it back again herself, alone and at once.

On the journey out to the Port not much more than a week ago the baby not yet born had travelled the river in a native boat with his mother and the Malay woman who was now climbing the gangplank ladder to the landing stage, sorrowful and frightened, behind Auntie May. She had carried her own baby for she was the wet nurse who had been taken to Mrs. Feathers’s confinement in case of an emergency should Mrs. Feathers have been unable to feed the child herself.

Nobody had expected Mrs. Feathers to die. The Clinic at the Port was good, the Baptist Mission efficient and known to her already for she had been a nurse before marriage to Feathers, the District Officer of Kotakinakulu province. She was a tough, lean Scot, like her husband, solid as a rock. She had nursed him through his war wounds of 1914, quieted his shell-shock, coped with his damaged ankle, borne his mad rages, loved him. She had been born in the East herself, loved the climate, the river, the people, and had never ailed for a day of this her first and straightforward pregnancy. She had brought to the Clinic only the wet-nurse and her prayer book, knowing that she would be back within the month. As she left she had been helped a little into the open boat but had not looked back. The landing stage stood on its high crooked stilts with only one person watching the boat disappear round the bend of the river—a girl of twelve called Ada, the wet-nurse’s eldest child. As stick-thin as the landing stage itself, the girl wound her arms about the rough branches and stayed long after the boat had disappeared.

Comfortable in the long low boat, Mrs. Feathers in her loose cotton dress—never a sarong—she was the District Officer’s wife—had scarcely looked pregnant. The baby had dropped low in the womb and become very quiet, which its mother knew meant the birth was imminent. In the Long House where they had rested that night, she had not worried that the child might be born early. With the peaceful happiness that often predicts labour, she had smiled and knitted a tiny lace jacket, fondly taking a strand of wool at a time and loosening it, holding it high. She had knitted most of the night, listening to the baboon on the roof clacking like a typewriter in short, unaccountable snatches of baboon monologue.

The wet-nurse, her own baby beside her, lay on the floor, terrified at being a day’s journey down the river from home. She whimpered.

“Now, now,” said Mrs. Feathers, patting her. “Hush, don’t be afraid. Tomorrow we’ll be at the Port and the next day the new baby will be here. I know. Then soon we shall all go home.” And she held up the jacket and looked at the pattern by the light of the kerosene lamp on the floor. She knew that the baby would be a girl and was finishing off the little garment with pink lacy scallops.

~~She finished the last scallop the following night in the Clinic but gave birth to a long, rangy, red-headed, eight-pound boy. She was delighted with him (Edward) and passed the jacket to the wet-nurse's silky brown baby, who never wore it, and the next day puerperal fever began its cruel course and three days later Mrs. Feathers died.~~

Ten days after that, the Welsh missionary Auntie May was plodding firmly on board the river steamer which might be the last to run before the onset of the monsoon, one big hand on the rail of the gangplank, the other arm tight round the swaddled child. Behind came the weeping and no longer indispensable wet-nurse with her baby. She had wept for two days. Auntie May never wept.

She had, however, felt a great plunge of spirits as the river boat rounded the bend of the river before the District Officer's landing, for there was nobody there except for the same young girl sitting at the ladder's top with her arms tight round her knees. The boat lay in the water, silent, waiting for people to appear. Nobody. Auntie May knew that though there was neither telephone nor mail direct to the District Officer's quarters, and their attempt to send a cable had failed, the news of his wife's death would certainly have seeped through to Alistair Feathers. She had half expected him to turn up at the Port to bring his son home himself. News flies fast through the jungle. Attendance at his wife's funeral would of course have been impossible, for the body had to be buried immediately, then, in the Kotakinakulu province.

"Not here," Auntie May allowed herself to say.

The wet-nurse was not surprised, however. Mr. Feathers had not come down to the landing stage to see his wife leave. Their goodbye—for them, a very affectionate goodbye—a kiss on the cheek (however had this child been conceived?)—had taken place inside the verandah of the house. A quick embrace, then out and down the verandah steps, Captain Feathers calling to the others to be ready. The wet-nurse was being well-paid and had been groomed for her possible job of nursing the baby with quantities of good food, and watched over against the betel nut and alcohol. Her elder daughter had come down to the landing stage, helped Mrs. Feathers to the gangplank—Mrs. Feathers had suddenly turned and given the girl a kiss—and watched the boat sidle towards the current and then pass from sight.

Here the girl was now, against Captain Feathers's orders, and she had watched for two days, her legs pressed against the banana-leaf barrier, desperately watching. At the Port these choppy waves had been nowhere to be seen and the river had run oily and thick, seemed hardly to move. Here though, up river, there were no glow-worm lights on the great invisible nets, no sounds of fishermen calling from boat to boat. No ghostly cartwheels of weed, flying like skaters on the surface of the running river almost outstripping it. No crocodile snout at the Port. No plop or scream of waterbird dropping of prey. Here on the landing stage, up river, fat metallic lizards moved about, long jaws angled for grub in the leaves. They moved silently around her feet. She kicked them away. They were harmless things.

And here was the river boat. Would Mrs. Feathers be there? If she was indeed dead her strong young body, her bright happy face would be already decaying in the wet earth of the Port's Christian cemetery.

The boat's engine reawakened with a roar and the boat approached the landing stage. Ada, the brown girl, twisted her arms tighter among the banana leaves. Here came lights. Men—not the District Officer—appeared to catch ropes.

The boat anchored, the engine stopped, the boat rocked and shuddered and Ada's mother and her baby sister and big Auntie May from the Mission began to disembark. Auntie May carried a light

bundle.

When she had both feet on the rickety platform, Auntie May looked at the girl and asked if she were the wet-nurse's big daughter. Ada said yes, and looked at the bundle, and Auntie May put it in her arms. Ada's mother went by, head-down over her own baby, afraid of seeing the District Officer somewhere in the shadows.

But there was no District Officer. Alistair Feathers was at his desk working, tonight not even drinking.

When Auntie May was admitted, he shook hands with her and sent for a servant to see her to her room, show her the bathhouse, make sure that food was taken to her.

"I can stay for several days," she said. "I'll risk the monsoon. To see that all is as well as can be for him."

"F-f-for him?"

"For your son. He is Edward. He's a fine boy."

"Good. Good."

He did not ask to see the baby who, by the time Auntie May left a week later, was the amazement of the village. A child with bright-blue eyes and white, white skin and curly chestnut hair. After Auntie May had left with a donation of ten pounds to the Mission, he gave orders for Ada to take charge of the child. Auntie May had already given orders (and the ten pounds) that Ada should sit each evening with the baby on the steps of his father's verandah. This she did for many months, but Alistair Feathers never came near.

During the monsoon Ada and the baby moved up the steps and on to the verandah and sat there listening to the deluge, the crashing steaming torrent of the rain, and at last the girl was told by the District Officer's servant to go away and take the child to live with her and his wet-nurse in the family hut. And so the baby's first years were in the Long House among brown skins, brown eyes, scraps of coloured clothes, the Malay language; often sleeping, sometimes making musical singing dreamily passing the time against the roar of the river and the rain. At night the lamps swung from the rafters and the baby watched the flames with their haloes of moths, heard the baboons with pleasure, saw the silver lizards without fear—their questing, swinging heads—and the geckos hooked into the mesh of the walls puffing out their lurid throats. He listened to the racket of the rats in the thatch, once watched with rapture as a fat snake came sliding up from a post-hole. Observed it being killed. He was satisfied by the nourishment of the wetnurse but passionate in his love for the girl.

Soon he stretched to pat her face, suck her chin, her ear. One day, at two months, gazing at her he gave a crow of laughter like a boy of two. Because of the memory of the child's kind mother, the Long House respected him and accepted him, an ivory child in their warm dun dust, and he was passed about, rocked to sleep, talked to and sung to and understood only Malay. By the time he was one he rolled and tottered and waddled in the village compound with the other children. There were a number of pale-skinned half-caste children from the Raj's peccadilloes. Sometimes this child's father crossed the compound but seemed not to see him, not to notice his wife's chestnut curls.

The village observed the District Officer. Captain Feathers was a strong just governor, but nobody liked him. His child was given extra attention and, from Ada, intense, unswerving, obsessive adoration.

When the child was four and a half, Auntie May came back. Big and strong, off the boat and over the landing stage to the compound, she looked about her, at once spotting Edward with his orange hair naked and sucking a mango, his feet and hands as pale with the mud of the compound as the other

children's. She made no move towards him—the women were watching from the dark openings of the huts—but nodded and smiled in his direction, to his surprise, for his mouth fell open—and went on to climb the steps of the verandah.

She was expected: there had been correspondence for some time. But Captain Feathers had not been at the landing stage.

She had not seen him for four and a half years but rumour had it that he was unchanged in his attitude to his son, that his shattered ankle was worse and that he was drinking heavily. It was said he had become eccentrically pedantically absorbed in his work and the management of his District. He was celibate.

No girls were brought to him by their mothers as “extra servants,” though he was handsome still, his eyes bright with malaria. He turned away from the women's beauty to the beauty of the whiskey in the glass. It did not seem to harm him. He had the Scottish immunity. He drank alone, for he had no friends. “Oh, Miss Neal. Auntie May. G-g-good evening.”

He looks tired, she thought.

She had come to take the child down to the Port, to be taught English for six months before the journey Home, where he would live with a Welsh family until he was eight. After that, he would go to his father's old Prep school and then his father's old Public school. Auntie May knew of the Welsh family with whom he was to be fostered. They were used to Raj Orphans. There would be home-cooked food, and it would be cheap (Alistair Feathers was a Scot). And there were two aunts about, his sisters, in Lancashire which was not really far away from North Wales.

“And of course,” said Auntie May at dinner, watching the lowering of the whiskey in the glass at the other end of the lamp-lit table, “you will have to take him to Wales. In six months' time. And you will by then have paid for him in advance.”

Alistair Feathers's eyes stared. Outside, the madhouse noises of the jungle. Inside, the servants padding about, taking plates, setting down others, offering fruit.

“He seems well and happy,” he said. “I have never seen the need for him to go Home. It's not the law.”

“You know perfectly well that it is the custom. Because of the risk of childhood illnesses out here. You went Home yourself.”

“I did,” said Alistair. “So help me God.”

Auntie May on the whole agreed with him. She'd seen great damage. Some children forgot their parents, clung to their adoptive families who later often forgot them. There were bad tales. Others grew to say they'd had a much better time in England away from their parents, whom they did not care for. There were children who worked hard at growing stolid and boring, and made marriages only in order to have roots of their own at last. They never told anything. And Auntie May had never been sure about the ferocity of Eastern childhood diseases. But in this case there was no mother.

“You've had no leave in ten years, Alistair. It isn't safe. Nobody knows better than you what happens out here to District Officers who work too hard. They drink and go native.”

Alistair fastidiously poured another whiskey and said, “At least I still change for dinner.”

He was in dinner jacket and black tie that would have been acceptable at the Ritz. Not a bead of sweat. Auntie May in sarong and sandals, her chin a little more whiskery, her arms resting almost on her elbows on the table a little more muscular, had put on weight and felt hot. She looked at Alistair and had to admire. She wanted to take his hand. Her hardest task now as she grew older in the Ministry was to deal with her longing to be touched—hugged, stroked by anyone, any human being—a friend, a lover, a child or even (and here she scented danger) a servant. Of either sex. She prayed about it.

asking that God's encircling arms would bring comfort. They did not.

"~~Alistair, you have no choice. You have a son who has no mother. At Home there will be your~~ sisters, both unmarried. They will love a little nephew. They don't answer any of my letters but you say you've been making arrangements, telling them? You have to take leave and accompany the boy home. It's what his mother would have done."

Alistair rose and limped about, his crooked shadow everywhere. Outside in the steaming night there was an upsurge of voices across the compound and the crowing of a cock. A drum began to beat.

"It's the festival. They're sacrificing a cockerel."

"You don't need to tell me, Auntie May."

"Your son is watching. Do you think this is the right way of life for a Christian child?"

"He isn't a Christian child."

"Yes, he is. I saw to that. He was baptised at birth. His mother held him. It's not the Baptist way but she asked for it. In case he didn't survive the river boat. He is baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who have nothing to do with the slitting of a cock's gullet at the full moon."

"They are calling on their god," said Alistair. "There is no God but God. I'm nearer to their god than yours ever was to me in 1914. Can the child not go on as he is?"

"No," she said and left it at that.

The next day she went looking for Edward and found him in the river shallows where Ada on the bank was rubbing at coloured cloths, the pair of them calling and laughing. Other children stood in the water sending showers of it over each other and Edward and Ada, with their round dark hands. Edward began to do the same and kicked more of it about with his long white feet. Ada, pretending to be furious, dropped her cloths and ran in amongst them, splashing back. All the heads bobbed away in the rocks like black floats. Edward splashed forward and took Ada round the waist and buried his face against her thighs. "You are my leopard," cried Edward Feathers in the Malay of the compound. "My beautiful leopard and I want to *eat* you alive."

This, thought Auntie May, will not do.

That night at dinner she said so.

"He goes Home, Alistair. If you won't take him, I will. I'm due some leave, too. There will be other English children on board. There always are. I'm told there may be two of his cousins joining a ship Home from Ceylon. We may pick them up. We shall be able to go the short way through Suez next year. Your sisters must organise warm clothes for Liverpool."

"They wouldn't know how," said Alistair. "They're independent spinsters. Play a lot of golf."

"Very well. I'll contact the Baptists. In Lancashire and in Wales. And I shall also—" she looked hard at him—"inform the Foreign Office. How well do you know your son, I wonder?"

"I see him."

"I've sent for him to come here now. Tonight." She clapped her hands and shouted for the servant in the Raj voice of thunder.

The servant looked at his master, but the master continued to open and shut a little silver box that had been his wife's pinbox and now held his tooth-picks. Then he took up his glass and looked into its golden depths.

"Yes. Very well."

Edward was brought in from just outside the door where he had been watching and holding Ada's hand. He blinked in the glare of light, stared at the tall man's queer clothes—the starched shirt, the gold watch chain—and the gleam of the table-silver and glass he had never seen before.

“Now then, Edward,” said Auntie May. “Greet your father, please.”

The child looked mystified.

“Your father. Go on.”

She gave him a push. “Bow, child. Hold out your hand.”

The child bowed but scarcely took his eyes from Alistair’s pinched yellow face and sandy square moustache.

Alistair suddenly threw himself back in his chair, dropped the silver box on the table and looked straight at Edward for the first time. His wife’s genial blue eyes looked back at him.

“Hullo,” he said, “Hullo—Edward. And so you are going away?” Like Auntie May, he spoke in Edward’s own Malay.

Edward wriggled and turned his attention to the silver box. “Did you know that you will be going away?”

“They say so,” said Edward.

“You are going first with Auntie May to the Port. For half a year. To learn to speak English, like all British boys have to do.”

Edward fiddled with the box.

“You hear English spoken sometimes, don’t you? You understand what it is?”

“Sometimes. Why do I have to? I can talk here.”

“Because you will one day have to go to England. It is called Home. They don’t speak Malay there.”

“Why can’t I stay here?”

“Because white children often die here.”

“I shall like to die here.”

“We want you not to die but to grow up big and strong.”

“Will Ada come?”

“We’ll see.”

“Can I go back to Ada now?”

“Here,” the father called as the child made off to the verandah where Ada stood in the shadow. “Here. Come back. Take this. It was your mother’s,” and he held out the silver box.

“Does Ada say I can?”

“I say you can. I am your father.”

“You can’t be,” said Edward.

Silence fell and Auntie May’s hands began to shake.

The servants were listening.

“And why not?”

“Because you’ve been here all the time without me.”

Auntie May left with Edward next morning. She felt sick and low.

I’m lugubrious, unattractive, bossy and a failure, she told God. I shan’t come here ever again. The man can rot.

Alistair, however, had been on the landing stage, leaning only a little on his stick, spick and span in his khaki shorts and sola topi. He had shaken hands with Auntie May, acknowledged Ada. Had shaken hands with the little boy, and asked if he had the box safe. Then he had given the order for the boat to be cast off, and had limped away.

“Wave,” said Auntie May, but Edward did not.

Nor did Alistair turn to look at his son’s second—and last—journey down the black river.

~~As the trees on either winding bank blotted out the landing stage, Edward, who had been struck dumb by the sight of Ada left alone on the tottering platform, began to scream "Ada, Ada, Ada!" and to point back up river. Auntie May held him tight, but he screamed louder, and writhed in her arms. She spoke sharply in Malay and he bit her shoulder, wriggled free and seemed about to jump overboard. A sailor caught him by the belt of the shorts that Auntie May had brought and that had astonished him. The sailor lifted him high. Water poured down the sailor's silky arms. "Hai, hai, hai," he laughed and Edward lashed out at him, sobbing. He was a tall, strong boy for four and a half but the boatman lifted him into the air like a swathe of flowers. Something of the boatman's smell and his happy eyes reminded the child of Ada, and the sobbing lessened and he went limp.~~

"Why does she stay? Why is she not here?"

"If she came with you, you would never learn English. You and she would talk Malay, as we are doing now."

"I will talk Malay with you always."

"Not after we get to the Port. You will learn something new. Ada will follow."

"Follow?"

"She will follow to the Port when you have to go Home."

Edward gave a shuddering, hopeless sob. He had just left Home. What would Ada do without him? Home? He was placed in Auntie May's lap and looked at her with eyes nearly mad and shouted "Ada, Ada!" He tried to hit Auntie May, and swim for it, but she grabbed him in her muscular arms and tried to rock him. He became limp again. The sobs that shook his body began to become farther apart. He hiccupped and tried to speak, but it came out jerky and odd: "Ek, ek, ek—" like the baboon on the roof. A cupfull of drink appeared from a bottle in Auntie May's bag. (Auntie May had negotiated these hateful kidnappings before.) The drink was dark and sweet and he gulped it in the middle of his last shuddering sob. She passed the empty cup to the boatman and rocked the child, allowing herself the pleasure of a child in her arms, knowing that this stringy, red-headed boy would never tempt her into lullabies or spoiling comforts. But he was warm against her broad chest, and now he slept. She seethed against the father, the system, the Empire which she had begun to think was not God's ordinance after all, and how had she ever thought it could be? Duty to these people was what mattered now. Well, to all people. Love and duty.

Six months later the two of them took ship to England alone.

There was no sign of the District Officer, no sign of Ada, and they travelled steerage—Alistair had been vague to Auntie May about how much more money he had to spare, and she was nervous lest the child became over-excited by uniforms and orchestras. There was also the question of table manners for someone who had not sat at tables until six months ago at the Port. At first Edward had tried to eat beneath the table. The Mission had done better with his English than with his social graces. All the Auntie May had heard from Captain Feathers since they parted was a letter saying that all financial arrangements had been made for the boy and that he would come into his own money in time. His father's sisters had been written to and had the address of the Public school where he would go when he was fourteen. Money had been sent to the foster parents in Wales.

Auntie May wrote back, making sure the father had the boy's Welsh address correctly, and told him that a letter would be written by Edward every week as soon as he could write. She made clear that Edward was not himself at present. That, at the Port, while he had absorbed English easily—he would be a linguist she was sure—he had become passive and listless and glum and when he talked now

seemed to be with some difficulty, as if he had a constriction in the throat like an old clock trying to gear itself up to strike. "A-a-a-a-a-ack." You longed to say the word for him. You sometimes almost wanted to shake him for he seemed to be doing it on purpose. When the words were eventually freed from the clockwork in the gullet, or the mind, out they poured far too fast, and when he paused for breath it was "ack-ack-ack, ek-ek-ek" again. At the Mission, other children had called him "the monkey" and he had in fact become rather like one of the bony, pale-orange baboons with their hot red eyes.

He never asked for Ada again.

At Colombo the ship took on more passengers and Auntie May suspected that two of the many white children with their ayahs and mothers might be Edward's cousins travelling (of course) first class. There had been rumours of this but she had made no enquiries. The two cousins were girls, one a little older than Edward, the other even younger. They would be spending the next four years together all three, in Wales, with the Didds family. Edward might be taunted for his father's apparent poverty if these cousins knew he was on the lower deck. There might be jealousy.

In this Auntie May was wrong. Whatever web the children were to make between themselves, it would always be too tight-knit for jealousy or taunts. But Auntie May kept her counsel, did her best with the stammering Edward as they crossed the molten-silver disc of the Indian Ocean beneath the beating sky. It was very hot in steerage but both were used to heat. From the upper deck in the first class, dance music floated down to them.

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