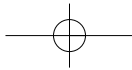
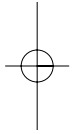
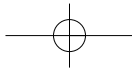
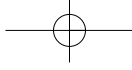
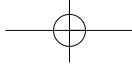


The People on Privilege Hill





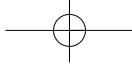


Drenching, soaking, relentless rain. Black cold rain for black cold winter Dorsetshire. Edward Feathers loved rain but warm rain, falling through oriental air, steam rising from sweating earth, dripping, glistening drops that rolled across banana leaves, rain that wetted the pelts of monkeys. Bloody Dorset, his retirement home. He was cold and old. He was cold and old and going out to lunch with a woman called Dulcie he'd never much liked. His wife Betty had been dead some years.

'I am rich,' announced Feathers – Sir Edward Feathers QC – to his affluent surroundings. On the walls of the vestibule of his house hung watercolours of Bengal and Malaya painted a hundred years ago by English memsahibs under parasols, sitting at their easels out of doors in long petticoats and cotton skirts with tulle and ribbons and painting aprons made of something called 'crash'.

Very good, too, those paintings, he thought. Worth a lot of money now.

Under his button-booted feet was a rug from Tashkent. Nearby stood a throne of rose-coloured silk, very tattered. Betty had fallen in love with it once, in Dacca. Nearby was a brass and ironwood umbrella stand with many spikes sticking out of it. Feathers turned to the umbrella stand, chose an umbrella, shook it loose: a fine black silk with a



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malacca handle and initialled gold band. He did not open it in the house on account of the bad luck this would unleash. A fresh wave of rain lashed at the windows. 'I could order a cab,' he said aloud. He had been a famous barrister and the sound of his voice had been part of his fortune. The old 'Oxford accent', now very rare, comforted him sometimes. 'I am rich. It's only a few minutes away. The fare is not the issue. It is a matter of legs. If I lose the use of my legs,' he said, for he was far into his eighties, 'I'm finished. I shall walk.'

Rain beat against the fanlight above the front door. There was a long ring on the bell and a battering at the knocker. His neighbour stood there in a dreadful anorak and without an umbrella.

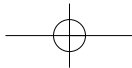
'Oh yes, Veneering,' said Feathers, unenthusiastic. 'You'd better come in. But I'm just going out.'

'May I share your car?' asked Veneering. 'To Dulcie's?'

'I'm not taking the car.' (Veneering was the meanest man ever to make a fortune at the Bar except for old what's-his-name, Fiscal-Smith, in the north.) 'By the time I've got it out of the garage and turned it round I could be there. I didn't know you were going to Dulcie's.'

'Oh yes. Big do,' said Veneering. 'Party for some cousin. We'll walk together, then. Are you ready?'

Feathers was wearing a magnificent twenty-year-old double-breasted three-piece suit. All his working life he had been called Filth not only because of the old joke (Failed In London Try Hong Kong) but because nobody had ever seen him other than immaculate: scrubbed, polished, barbered,



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manicured, brushed, combed, perfect. At any moment of his life Feathers could have been presented to the Queen.

‘Are *you* ready?’ he asked.

‘I’ll take the anorak off’, said Veneering, his scruffy old rival who now lived next door, ‘when we get there. Don’t *you* need a coat?’

‘I have my umbrella,’ said Feathers.

‘Oh yes, I could borrow one of your umbrellas. Thanks.’ And Veneering stepped in from the downpour bringing some of it with him. He squelched over to the Benares pillar and started poking about, coming up with a delicate pink parasol with a black tassel.

Both men regarded it.

‘No,’ said Feathers. ‘That’s a lady’s parasol. Betty’s.’

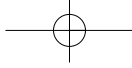
Veneering ran his arthritic fingers down the silk. Outside the rain had hushed. ‘Just for down the road,’ he said. ‘I’d enjoy carrying it. I remember it.’

‘It’s not on offer,’ said Feathers. ‘Sorry.’

But Veneering, like some evil gnome, was over the doorstep again, introducing the parasol to the outer air. It flew up at once, giving a glow to his face as he looked up into its lacquered struts. He twirled it about. ‘Aha,’ he said.

Down came the rain again and Feathers, with a leonine roar of disgust, turned back to the umbrella-stand. Somewhere in the bottom of it were stubby common umbrellas that snapped open when you pressed a button. Right for Veneering.

‘We’ll be late,’ said Veneering from the drive, considering Feathers’s old man’s backside bent over the umbrella-stand, floppy down the backs of his thighs. (Losing his flanks. Bad



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sign. Senile.) Veneering still had the bright blue eyes of a young man. Cunning eyes. And strong flanks. ‘In fact we’re late already. It’s after one.’ He knew that to be late was for Feathers a mortal sin.

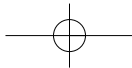
So Feathers abandoned the search, checked his pockets for house keys, slammed the front door behind him and sprang off down the drive on his emu legs under an impeccable black dome, overtaking Veneering’s short but sturdy legs, that thirty years ago had bestriden the colony of Hong Kong and the international legal world – and quite a few of its women.

Veneering trotted, under the apricot satin, way behind.

One behind the other they advanced up the village hill beneath overhanging trees, turned to the right by the church, splashed on. It was rather further to walk than Feathers had remembered. On they went in silence except for the now only murmuring rain, towards Privilege Road.

Dulcie’s address was Privilege House, seat at one time, she said, of the famous house of the Privé-Lièges who had arrived with the Conqueror. Those who had lived in the village all their lives – few enough now – were doubtful about the Privé-Lièges and thought that as children they had been told of some village privies once constructed up there. Dulcie’s husband, now dead, had said, ‘Well, as long as nobody tells Dulcie. Unless of course the privies were Roman.’ He had been a lawyer too and had retired early to the south-west to read Thomas Hardy. He’d had private means, and needed them with Dulcie.

There had been some Hardy-esque dwellings around



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Privilege House with thatch and rats, but now these were glorified as second homes with gloss paint and lined curtains and polished door knockers. The owners came thundering down now and then on Friday nights in cars like Iraqi tanks stuffed with food from suburban farmers' markets. They thundered back to London on the Monday morning. Gravel and laurel had appeared around the cottages and in front of Dulcie's Norman demesne. A metal post said 'Privilege Road'. The post had distressed her. But she was an unbeatable woman.

Feathers paused at the top of the hill outside a cot (four bed, two bath) and called over his shoulder, 'Who the hell is this?' For a squat sort of fellow was approaching from a lateral direction, on their port bow. He presented himself into the rain as a pair of feet and an umbrella spread over the body at waist level. Head down, most of him was invisible. The umbrella had spikes sticking out here and there, and the cloth was tattered and rusty. A weapon that had known campaigns.

When it came up close, the feet stopped and the umbrella was raised to reveal a face as hard as wood.

'Good God!' said Veneering. 'It's Fiscal-Smith,' and the rain began to bucket down again upon the three of them.

'Oh, good morning,' said Fiscal-Smith. 'Haven't seen you, Feathers, since just after Betty died. Haven't seen you, Veneering, since that embarrassing little matter in the New Territories. Nice little case. Nice little milch cow for me. Pity the way they went after you in the Law Reports. Are you going to Dulcie's?'

'I suppose you're the cousin,' said Veneering.

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‘What cousin? I was a friend of poor old Bill till he dropped me for Thomas Hardy. Come on, let’s keep going. I’m getting wet.’

In single file the three old judges pressed ahead: black silk, apricot toile and bundle of prongs.

Fiscal-Smith made uncouth noises that in another man might have indicated mirth, and they reached Dulcie’s tall main gate, firmly closed. Through the wrought iron there was very much on view a lawn and terrace of simulated stone and along the side of the house a conservatory that was filled with coloured moons. They were umbrellas all open and all wet.

‘Whoever can be coming?’ said Feathers, who originally had thought he was the only guest. ‘Must be dozens.’

‘Yes, there *was* some point to the cousin,’ said Veneering, ‘but I can’t remember what. She talks too fast.’

‘It’s a monk,’ said Fiscal-Smith. ‘Not a cousin but a monk. Though of course a monk *could* be a cousin. Look at John the Baptist.’

‘A monk? At Dulcie’s?’

‘Yes. A Jesuit. He’s off to the islands to prepare for his final vows. This is his last blow-out. She’s taking him to the airport afterwards, as soon as we’ve left.’

Feathers winced at ‘blow-out’. He was not a Catholic, or anything, really, except when reading the Book of Common Prayer or during the Sunday C of E service if it was 1666, but he didn’t like to hear of a ‘blow-out’ before vows.

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‘*What* airport?’ asked Veneering. ‘Our airport? The airport at the end of the universe?’ for he sometimes read modern books.

Feathers, who did not, suspected nastiness.

‘Dulcie’s a kind woman,’ he said, suppressing the slight thrill of excitement at the thought of her puffy raspberry lips. ‘Very kind. And the wine will be good. But she’s obviously asked a horde,’ he added with a breath of regret. ‘There are dozens of umbrellas.’

In the conservatory trench six or so of them seemed to stir, rubbing shoulders like impounded cattle.

Feathers, the one who saw Dulcie most often, knew that the wrought-iron gate was never unlocked and was only a viewing station, so he led the way round the house and they were about to left-wheel into a gravel patch when a car – ample but not urban – pounced up behind them, swerved in front of them, swung round at the side door and blocked their path. Doors were flung open and a lean girl with a cigarette in her mouth jumped out. She ground the cigarette stub under her heel, like the serpent in Eden, and began to decant two disabled elderly women. They were supplied with umbrellas and directed, limping, to the door. One of them had a fruity cough. The three widowed judges might have been spectres.

‘God!’ said Fiscal-Smith. ‘Who are they?’

‘It’s the heavenly twins,’ said Feathers with one of his roaring cries. ‘Sing in the church choir. Splendidly.’ He found himself again defensive about the unloved territory of his

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old age and surprised himself. When had Fiscal-Smith last been near a church? Or bloody Veneering? Never.

‘Who’s the third?’ asked Fiscal-Smith. ‘Is she local?’

‘She’ll be the carer,’ said Feathers. ‘Probably from Lithuania.’

‘This is going to be a rave,’ said Veneering, and Feathers felt displeased again and almost said, ‘We’re all going to get old *one* day,’ but remembered that he’d soon be ninety.

A blaze of yellow light washed suddenly across the rainy sky, ripping the clouds and silhouetting the tree clumps on Privilege Hill. He thought: I should have brought something for Dulcie, some flowers. Betty would have brought flowers. Or jam or something. And was mortified to see some sort of offering emerging from Veneering’s disgusting anorak and – great heaven! – something appearing in Fiscal-Smith’s mean paw. Feathers belonged to an age when you didn’t take presents or write thank-you letters for luncheon but he wasn’t sure, all at once, that Dulcie did. He glared at Fiscal-Smith’s rather old-looking package.

‘It’s a box of tea,’ said Fiscal-Smith. ‘Christmas-pudding flavour from Fortnum and Mason. I’ve had it for years. I’m not sure if you can get it now. Given it by a client before I took Silk. In the sixties.’

‘I wonder what the monk will bring,’ said Veneering. He seemed to be cheering up, having seen the carer’s legs.

And here was Dulcie coming to welcome them, shrieking prettily in grey mohair and pearls; leading them to the pool of drying umbrellas. ‘Just drop them down. In the conservatory trough. It’s near the hot pipes. It’s where I dry my



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dahlias. They love it. Don't they look pretty? Sometimes I think they'll all *rise* into the air.'

(She's insane, thought Feathers.)

'And I must run to my soufflé,' she called. 'Do go in. Get a drink. Awful rain. So good of you to come out. Introduce yourselves.'

In the sitting room there was no sign of the guest of honour. The carer was pouring herself an enormous drink. The cleaning lady of the village, Kate, was handing round titbits. She knew the guests intimately. 'I told you not to wear that shirt until I'd turned the collar,' she hissed at Veneering.

They all drank and the rain rattled down on the glass roof of the umbrella house. The clocks ticked.

'What's that over there?' asked Veneering.

A boy was regarding them from a doorway.

'A boy, I think,' said Feathers, a childless man.

'Maybe this is the cousin. Hello there! Who're you? Are you Dulcie's young cousin?'

The boy said nothing but padded after them as they carried their drinks into another room, where he continued to stare. 'Hand the nuts round,' said Kate the cleaner. 'Be polite,' but the boy took no notice. He approached Veneering and inspected him further.

'Why ever should I be Granny's cousin?'

Veneering, unused for many years to being cross-questioned, said, 'We understood we were to meet a cousin.'

'No. It's a monk. Do you play music?'

'Me?' said Veneering. 'Why?'

'I just wondered. I play cello and drums.'



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'Oh. Good!'

'In America. I'm an American citizen. I don't come over often.'

'That explains everything.' (God, I'm hungry!)

'What do you mean?'

'Don't you say "sir" in America? I thought all American children were polite now.'

'Actually, not all. Sir. I know one who goes straight over to the fridge in people's houses and looks in to see what they've got.'

(Fiendishly hungry.)

'Would you have guessed I was American? I don't do the voice. I *can* do the voice but only at school. My parents are British. I won't salute the flag either.'

'You have a lot of confidence. How old are you?'

'I'm eight. But I'm not confident. I don't do anything wrong. I believe in God. I say my prayers.'

'I think we're all getting into deep water here,' said Fiscal-Smith, carrying away his gin-and-mixed. 'Off you go, boy. Help in the kitchen.'

The boy took no notice. He was concentrating on Veneering. 'Sir,' he said, 'do you, by any chance, play the drums?'

'*Off* you go now!' cried Dulcie, sweeping in and pushing the child under her grandmotherly arm out of the path of the three great men. 'This is Herman. My grandson. He's eight. I'm giving my daughter a break. Herman, pass the nuts.'

*

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'My *wretched* monk,' Dulcie said. 'I don't think we'll wait. Oh, well, if you're sure you don't mind. The soufflé will be ready in about ten minutes and then we *can't* wait a *moment* more.' (Feathers's tummy rumbled.)

'But *do* you play the drums?' insisted Herman, circling Veneering before whose face hardened criminals had crumbled. Herman's face held up.

'I do, as a matter of fact,' Veneering said, turning away to take a canapé.

'They've given me some. Granny did. For my birthday. Come and see.'

And like Mary's lamb, Judge Veneering followed the child to a chaotic playroom where drums in all their glory were set up near a piano.

'I didn't know there was a piano here,' said Veneering to himself, but aloud. 'And a Bechstein.' He sat down and played a little.

Herman hove up alongside and said, 'You're good. I knew you'd be good.'

'Are you good?'

'No. Not at piano. I do a bit of cello. It's mostly the drums.'

Veneering, feet among toys, began to tap his toes and the Bechstein sang. Then it began to sing more noisily and Veneering closed his eyes, put his chin in the air and howled like a dog.

'Hey. Great!' said Herman, thumping him.

'Honky-tonk.' Veneering began to bob up and down.

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‘What’s honky-tonk? D’you want to hear some drumming? Sir?’

‘*Herman,*’ called his grandmother.

‘Better go,’ said Veneering. Then he let his voice become a black man’s voice and began singing the Blues.

‘Better not,’ said Herman. ‘Well, not before lunch.’

The child sat close against Veneering at the table, gazing up at his yellow old face.

‘Herman, pass the bread,’ said Dulcie, but all Herman did was ask, ‘Did you ever have a boy like me that played drums?’

‘I did,’ said Veneering, surprising people.

‘After lunch can we have a go at them?’

‘Eat your soufflé,’ said Dulcie, and Herman obediently polished it off, wondering why something so deflated and leathery should be considered better than doughnuts or cake.

There was a pause after the plates were taken away and, unthinkably, Veneering, his eyes askew with gin and wine, excused himself and made again for the piano, Herman trotting behind.

‘Oh no, I won’t have this,’ said Dulcie.

‘America, I suppose,’ said Feathers.

A torrent of honky-tonk flowed out of the playroom and some loud cries. The drums began.

Bass drums, floor-tom, normal-tom, cymbals. High-hat, crash-ride, thin *crash!* And now, *now*, the metallic stroking, the brush, the whispering ghost – listen, listen – and now the big bass drum. Hammers on the pedals, cross arms, cross

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legs, tap tap, paradiddle, paradiddle, *let go!* Hammer on pedal now then – HIGH HAT! CRASH RIDE! THIN CRASH!

The glass doors of the conservatory, now filming up, shook as if they'd received the tremors of a not-too-distant earthquake, and a new sound joined the drums as Veneering began to sing and almost outstrip the tremors. Not a word could be heard round the dining table and Dulcie rushed out of the room. As she left, came the crescendo and the music ceased, to reverberations and cackling laughter.

'*Herman!* Please return to the table. Don't dare to monopolise Judge Veneering.'

And Herman, staggering dazed from the mountain tops, let his small jaw drop and fell off his perch, scattering instruments.

Veneering sat on at the piano, hands on knees, chin on chest, enwrapped in pleasure. Then quietly, he began to play again.

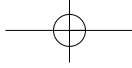
'No – I'm sorry, Terry' – she had remembered his nasty little name – 'I'm sorry but I think the latecomer has just arrived. Come at once.'

There was a commotion going on in the hall.

'Dear Terry – *please*. It's boeuf bourguignon.'

Veneering jumped up and embraced her, grinning. 'Honky-tonk!' he said. 'He's good, that boy. Tremendous on the normal-tom. Could hear that bass a quarter-mile away. Beautiful brush on the snare.' He went back to the dining room rubbing his hands. 'Been playing the Blues,' he said to one and all.

'You haven't,' said Herman.



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‘Well, the Pale-Rose Pinks,’ said Veneering. ‘Near enough.’

‘Veneering, more wine,’ said Feathers warningly.

‘Much better not,’ said Fiscal-Smith.

The two damaged sisters sat, making patterns on the damask with their fingers.

‘Hey! Could he play as well as me, your son?’ asked Herman in an American accent.

There was a pause.

‘Probably,’ said Veneering.

‘Did he make it? Was he a star? In music?’

‘No. He died.’

‘What did he die of?’

‘Be quiet, boy!’ Feathers roared.

‘Now,’ said Dulcie. ‘Now, I do believe – here is our monk. Father Ambrose. On his way to St Umbrage’s on the island of Skelt.’

‘Bullet,’ said Veneering. ‘Soldier.’

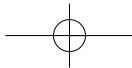
‘It’s stupid to be a soldier if you can play music.’

‘As you say. Quite so. Now, get on with your lunch, boy. We’ve plainsong ahead of us.’

But the plainsong was not to be. Nor did the monk join them for lunch. Kate the cleaner put her head round the dining-room door and asked to speak to Dulcie for a moment – outside.

And Dulcie returned with stony face and sat down, and Kate, unsmiling, carried in the stew. ‘Take Father Ambrose’s place away,’ said Dulcie. ‘Thank you, Kate. It will give us more room.’

Cautious silence emanated from the guests. There was



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electricity in the air. In the very curtains. Time passed. The carer thought that she would kill for a cigarette.

‘If he’s not coming in, Granny,’ asked Herman, loud and clear, ‘can I have some more stew? It’s great.’

Dulcie looked at him and loved him, and there was a chorus about the excellence of the stew, and Fiscal-Smith said it was not a stew but a veritable *daube* as in the famous lunch in *To the Lighthouse*.

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Dulcie grandly. ‘I bought it for freezing. From the farmers’ market, months ago. I don’t think I’ve ever been to a lighthouse.’

‘Virginia Woolf couldn’t have given us a stew like this. Or a *daube*,’ said one of the sisters (Olga), who had once been up at Oxford.

‘She wasn’t much of a cook,’ said the other one (Fairy). ‘But you don’t expect it, when people have inner lives.’

‘As we must suppose’, Feathers put in quickly, before Dulcie realised what Fairy had said, ‘this monk has. He is certainly without inner manners.’

Everyone waited for Dulcie to say something but she didn’t. Then, ‘Granny, why are you crying?’ and Herman ran to her and stroked her arm. ‘Hey, Granny, we don’t care about the monk.’

‘He – he suddenly felt – indisposed and – he vanished.’ Her lunch party – her reputation as the hostess on Privilege Hill – gone. They would all laugh about it for ever.

Dulcie couldn’t stop imagining. She could hear the very words. ‘*That* brought her down a peg. Asked this VIP bishop,

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or archbishop, or [in time] the Prince of Wales, and he took one step inside the house and went right out again. And she'd offered to drive him to the airport. What a snob! Of course, Kate knows more than she'll say. There must be something scandalous. Drunken singing and drums. African drumming. Yes – at Dulcie's. But Kate is very loyal. They'll all be leaving her a nice fat legacy.'

'A funny business. He probably caught sight of the other guests.'

'Or the dreadful grandson.'

Etc.

Then someone would be sure to say, 'D'you think there *was* a monk? Dulcie's getting . . . well, I'll say nothing.'

'Yes, there *was* someone. Standing looking in at them over that trough of umbrellas. Some of them saw him. Dripping wet.'

'Didn't he have an umbrella himself?'

'No. I don't think they carry them. He was wearing see-through plastic. It shone. Round his head was a halo.'

'On Privilege Hill?'

'Yes. It was like *Star Wars*.'

'Well, it makes a change.'

The story died away. The Iraq war and the condition of the Health Service and global warming took over. The weather continued rainy. The old twins continued to drowse. The carer had home thoughts from abroad and considered how English country life is more like Chekhov than *The Archers* or Thomas Hardy or even the Updike ethic with which it is

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sometimes compared. She would write a paper on the subject on her return to Poland.

But the startling image of the dripping monk remained with her. She felt like posting him an umbrella.

Kate, the ubiquitous cleaner, told her friend the gardener, 'Oh yes, he was real all right. And young. And sort of holy-looking.'

The gardener said, 'Watch it! You'll get like them. They're all bats around here.'

'I feel like giving him an umbrella,' Kate said. 'Wonderful smile.'

And one day Dulcie, in the kitchen alone with the gardener, Herman visiting Judge Veneering for a jam session, said, 'Don't tell anyone this, but that day, Father Ambrose in the rain, I kept thinking of Easter morning. The love that flowed from the tomb. Then the disappearance. I want to *give* him something.' She splashed gin into her tonic.

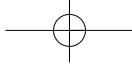
'Don't have another of those,' said the gardener to his employer.

Later, to old Feathers, who had called to present her with his dead wife's pink umbrella, having wrested it the day before with difficulty from Veneering, she said: 'I want to give him something.'

'Come, Dulcie. He behaved like a churl.'

'Oh, no. He must suddenly have been taken ill. I *did* know him, you know. We met at a day of silence in the cathedral.'

'Silence?'



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‘Yes. But our eyes met.’

‘And he wangled a lunch and a lift?’

‘Oh, didn’t *wangle*. He wouldn’t *wangle*. We talked for a few minutes.’

‘A fast worker.’

‘Well, so was Christ,’ said Dulcie smugly.

Feathers, wishing he could tell all this rubbish to his dear dead wife, said, ‘You’re in love with the perisher, Dulcie.’

‘Certainly not. And we’re all perishers. I just need to fill the blank. To know why he melted away.’

‘He probably caught sight of Herman.’

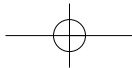
‘How dare you!’

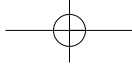
‘No – I mean it. Monks have to keep their distance from small boys.’

And Dulcie yearned for her dear dead husband to kick Feathers out of the house.

‘I have a notion to send that . . . person in the garden – an umbrella,’ said one twin to the other. ‘I shall send it to Farm Street. In London. The Jesuit HQ. “To Father Ambrose, from a friend, kindly forward to St Umbrage on Skelt.”’ The other twin nodded.

Fiscal-Smith, who never wasted time, had already laid his plans. On his train home to the north on his second-class return ticket bought months ago (like the stew) to get the benefit of a cheaper fare, he thought he would do something memorable. Send the monk a light-hearted present. An umbrella would be





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amusing. He would send him his own. It was, after all, time for a new one. And he had had a delightful day.

Staunch fellow, he thought. Standing out there in the rain.

Veneering phoned Feathers to see if Feathers would go in with him on an umbrella for that fellow at Dulcie's on the way to the Scottish islands, the fellow who didn't turn up. Feathers said no and put the phone down. Feathers, a travelled man and good at general knowledge, had never heard of an island called Skelt or a saint called Umbrage. No flies on Judge Feathers. Hence Veneering because the pleasure of the lunch party would not leave him – the boy who liked him, the Bechstein, the drumming, the jam sessions to come – amazed himself by ordering an umbrella from Harrods and having it sent.

Five parcels were delivered soon afterwards to Farm Street Church. One parcel had wires and rags sticking out of it. And because it was a sensitive time just then in Irish politics, and because the parcels were all rather in the shape of rifles, the Farm Street divines called the police.

Old Filth was right. The Jesuits had never heard of Father Ambrose. So they kept the umbrellas (for a rainy day, ho-ho) except for Fiscal-Smith's. And that they chucked in the bin.

