



Herring in the Smoke

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CHAPTER ONE

It was at his own memorial service that I first spoke to Roger Norton Vane.

I had arrived slightly late, being less used than I once was to London's Byzantine one-way systems and parking regulations. By the time I had found a more or less legal place to leave my car within walking distance of the church, I was uncomfortably aware that I might not get a seat. Vane had been well known and (at least with the general public) popular. I ended up being ushered into a pew at the very back, along with an amiable old gentleman dressed incongruously in beige cotton trousers, open sandals and a heavy, navy-blue overcoat, who was equally late but either unaware of the fact or not much bothered.

At first he ignored me, craning his neck one way and another to see who occupied the seats in the many rows in front of us. Occasionally he nodded, as if approving

of what he saw. Now and then he pulled a face. Once he rather theatrically held his nose. Then finally he turned in my direction.

‘Just flew in this morning,’ he said, at a volume that suggested the whole church deserved to know. He jabbed with his thumb at his thick woollen lapels. ‘I’d forgotten how cold it was back here. Isn’t March supposed to be spring or something? Daffodils? Easter bonnets? Fluffy little lambs, waiting to be turned into chops? Flew over with not so much as a sweater in my suitcase. Certainly nothing for this weather. So, I asked the taxi driver to stop off at’ – he named an outfitter who had gone out of business some fifteen years before – ‘and the damned fool said he’d never heard of it. Took me to Marks and Spencer. Said they had loads of overcoats there. Actually they’d already switched to their summer stock. Still, they had this little number in pure English wool on the Reduced rail. Quite natty. Made in Vietnam, oddly enough. Funny, when you think about it. Vietnam. Right next door to us.’

‘Ah . . .’ I said. I glanced nervously towards the distant lectern in case things were about to begin. I wasn’t sure we had time for a long explanation about how he got his new coat, or why Vietnam was just next door to Islington, and I didn’t want to find myself in lone mid-conversation as an otherwise respectful silence descended.

My companion, however, was clearly not worried that he was in danger of interrupting anything important. He looked knowingly at me and then uttered something in a language I didn’t understand – lilting, musical but at the same time slightly harsh.

‘Sorry?’ I said.

He repeated it with a grin. 'I live in Laos, you see,' he added. He pronounced it 'Lao', without the final 's', which I've always regarded as a bit of an affectation; but maybe not if you actually live there and speak the language, as he apparently did. 'Decent little country, all things considered. Still twenty years behind Vietnam and at least forty behind Singapore. But comfortable enough these days. And well run. No hint of democracy, thank goodness. No human rights to speak of. Absolutely top place. Do you know it at all?'

I smiled apologetically and looked again towards the far end of the church, but there was no indication that anyone had plans to begin on time. A very famous writer, who was due to speak at the service, was leaning against a pew, checking his notes in an unhurried way. Vane's niece, whom I had got to know well over the past month or so, was standing and chatting to guests. It was all remarkably relaxed; but this was, I kept having to remind myself, not a funeral but a joyous celebration of the life and work of Roger Norton Vane. There was no need for solemnity. It seemed impolite not to introduce myself to my talkative neighbour.

'I'm Ethelred Tressider,' I said, holding out my hand.

The gentleman in the glossy new overcoat responded with a remarkably firm handshake.

'But I usually write my novels as Peter Fielding,' I added. 'I'm a writer, you see . . .'

He shook his head. He hadn't heard of me. I felt I was losing his attention.

'And sometimes I write as J. R. Elliott,' I added anyway. 'Historical crime set in the fourteenth century. Maybe you might have . . .?'

He shook his head again. Sometimes people make

an initial pretence, purely out of politeness, of trying to remember whether they've read one of my books; but his look made it crystal clear that he couldn't be even remotely arsed. I decided not to enquire if he'd come across any of the lightweight romances I write as Amanda Collins. I had just turned back to my service sheet when he said something that I was sure I must have misheard.

'Sorry,' I replied, looking up, 'I thought just for a moment that you said you were Roger Norton Vane.' I smiled at my error.

'No, that's what I said,' he replied.

'You mean you're some relative of the writer . . .'

'No, I mean I am the person in whose honour today's festivities are being organised. I am Roger Vane. The writer. Recently deceased.'

I looked at the photo on the order of service that I had been handed as I came in, and then at the gentleman next to me. I knew the photo well. I had actually supplied it to the organisers myself. If this was Roger Norton Vane beside me, he had aged considerably since the picture was taken. But twenty years is a long time.

'You don't believe me, do you?' he asked.

'I don't know what to believe,' I said. 'It's just that . . .'

'You thought I was dead?'

'Everyone thought that,' I said. 'That's why we're all here. In this church. It's your memorial service. What I was going to say was: it's just that I'm your biographer.'

'Are you? You'll probably be wondering what I've been doing for the past twenty years, then.'

'Yes,' I said. 'When writing the final chapters I did wonder a bit.'

‘Bet you did. So, I have a biographer now, do I? I’ve clearly gone up in the world since I died. Who did you say you were?’

I told him again. Just the Tressider bit this time.

‘Well, maybe not that far up,’ he said. ‘Were you the best they could manage?’

‘I’m not sure I was the publisher’s first choice,’ I said apologetically.

‘I certainly hope you weren’t,’ he said. ‘Still, we are where we are. We’ll need to have a chat. Properly. Now I’m back in the Smoke. I’ll have plenty of stories to tell you, and not just about my time in the East. Let the literary world tremble in its kitten heels. I could spin you a yarn or two about him . . . and her.’ His thumb indicated a prominent television presenter and the CEO of a big publishing house. Neither was actually trembling at that moment, but I appreciated that they might be soon. Like the rest of the congregation, they were tied up in their own conversations, exchanging platitudes, swapping lies about sales figures. Nobody had felt it worthwhile to listen to us – the loud-mouthed man in a blue overcoat and his tall but slightly nervous companion.

‘So you mean you’ve been in Laos for the past twenty years?’ I asked.

Roger Norton Vane gave me a broad smile. ‘There and other places. And unfortunately not quite as dead as everyone thought,’ he said. ‘They’re all going to look a bit silly, don’t you think? Everyone except you and me, Ethelred.’

He gave me a conspiratorial wink. Then, finally, the organ finally began playing and the human voices around

us were stilled, one by one, as if by a vast wave rolling inexorably from the front to the back of the packed church. At the same moment the sun suddenly burst through the great stained glass window above the altar, sending a bright technicolour dawn into the chancel. We both turned towards the renascent glow, each curious, in our own way, to see what would happen next.

CHAPTER TWO

It had been twenty years before the memorial service that Roger Norton Vane had vanished without trace. Twenty years to the day.

Vane had, when I first came across his work, been a moderately successful writer of crime novels set in the nineteen fifties – which at that time just about qualified as historical fiction. Later the books were turned into a television series and his face became as familiar to the public as his well-illustrated covers. One of my reasons for believing that he had indeed now returned from the dead was that I recognised the voice – I'd heard it often on television and radio and, as guest of honour, at crime writing conferences. I told you that I'd never spoken to him, which is true, but I'd listened to him more times than I could recall. I started to read his books because everyone else was doing so and continued because they were genuinely very good – not pastiche fifties, but quirky

modern novels that evoked the period wonderfully well. His rise seemed unstoppable. Then, quite suddenly and at the height of his fame, he had disappeared without trace.

He had gone on holiday to Thailand, with his then partner, Tim Macdonald. One afternoon they had set off from their hotel on a walk through the jungle. Adventurous though this may sound, the mountain forest path was in fact much used and well signposted. An averagely fit person could complete the circular route, as described invitingly in the hotel brochure, in just over two and a half hours. The path was surprisingly flat, for the most part an old logging road, hugging the contours of the adjacent slopes. Many walked it in trainers in the dry season. Both men were fit and more than capable of a gentle stroll of this sort. They had, according to the hotel, been advised to stick strictly to the trail, though Macdonald later denied that any such warning had been given. It was subsequently agreed by all that they had left at two o'clock and had a very adequate four hours of daylight to complete their circuit. Macdonald returned alone at quarter to five, saying that his friend had decided to continue a bit further alone, but should be back shortly. That was his entire explanation. Macdonald went to their room to take a shower. At five-thirty he came to reception to return the walking stick he had borrowed and to enquire whether his partner had shown up and perhaps gone straight to the bar. He hadn't. The receptionist noted that Tim had a scratch on his face, which he claimed was from a thorn. Since there were in fact thorns in the jungle, the receptionist did not think to probe any further. With hindsight, he subsequently admitted, perhaps he should have done.

Later – very much later – the official enquiry into the

matter established that a proper search did not begin until well after dark, for which Macdonald and the hotel blamed each other with equal enthusiasm. Hotel staff had retraced Vane's journey, their small handheld torches casting a feeble light on the trunks of the huge, vaulting forest trees and none at all into the vast black expanses beyond. They were not helped by the fact that Macdonald was unclear at exactly which point the two had parted company, especially since the torch batteries were by that stage nearly exhausted and one liana-clad tree looked much like another.

A second attempt was made at first light, with every spare staff member – for the most part city-bred and unfamiliar with the scary green waste around them – now urgently scouring the jungle. The police were finally called in towards midday, over twenty hours after Vane and Macdonald had set out. The local chief superintendent would eventually tell the investigating committee that by then it was far too late – Vane had already perished or wandered well beyond the area they were searching. There were, he hinted, one or two scrawny tigers still in the area who might arguably have been looking for breakfast at a time when the police had yet to be alerted. The hotel manager counterclaimed that if helicopters had been deployed straight away, as he had frantically demanded over the phone, they could have covered the larger search area that the chief superintendent rightly referred to. In seven years at the hotel he had never seen a tiger. He said that poachers had hopefully shot the last of them years before. The one pictured in the brochure lived in Bangkok Zoo and was for illustrative purposes only. Both implied, as much as they dared, that Macdonald had been negligent of his friend's welfare – that he should not have left

him in the first place and that he should subsequently have been less amenable to the suggestion that nothing untoward had happened in the possibly-tiger-haunted jungle. He should not have gone to the bar and ordered a Singapore gin sling with fried cashew nuts on the side. Had bitter recriminations alone taken the investigation forward, Vane would have been located at once. But he wasn't.

When three days of searching had come to a fruitless conclusion, Macdonald was briefly and very publicly arrested for murder and flown to Bangkok for questioning, the almost-healed scratch on his face now being regarded as incriminating in the extreme. His explanation that his friend had decided to continue alone was minutely dissected – to where would Vane have continued on a circular path, other than back to the hotel? Did Macdonald mean that he had turned back and Vane carried on round the path? Or did he mean that he had carried on and Vane retraced his steps? Or something else entirely? Macdonald seemed unsure which he meant, raising further doubts in the mind of the police. Why had he taken the walking stick to his room rather than return it immediately to the hotel desk? Macdonald conceded that he had cleaned it before returning it but said his intentions had been helpful rather than otherwise. Had he used it as a murder weapon, he argued, he would have thrown it into the jungle and risked being charged twenty Baht for its non-return.

These false and hurtful accusations, Macdonald later argued, caused the scaling down of the search at a critical time. He was eventually released without charges being laid and left for England early the following morning, a precipitous departure for which he was criticised by anyone

looking to shift the blame from themselves. As it turned out, he could have stayed for another twenty years without being able to play any meaningful part in the investigation.

Of course, in the months that followed, there were countless sightings. A German couple, staying at the same hotel a few weeks later, reported seeing a man in the jungle, who had smiled and waved at them. A hat, not entirely unlike the one Vane had been wearing but possibly of a different colour, was found shortly after by somebody who had themselves accidentally strayed off the path, and vouched for the ease with which it could be done.

A girl in a bar in Bangkok said she had definitely served Vane a double Mekhong and Coke with ice and lemon, but she wasn't sure when. He was seen getting into a taxi in Kuala Lumpur and getting out of one in Penang. He was seen crossing the road very, very carefully in Hanoi. He bought a newspaper in Hong Kong and told the vendor to keep the change, which was admittedly not a great deal. He won a large sum of money at a casino in Macao. He was most certainly seen, a year or so later, begging by the side of the road in Calcutta, wearing a blue T-shirt and green shorts with the logo of the Brazilian football team. He had a long conversation with a British pensioner on the beach in Galle, and definitely said that his name was 'Vane' or 'Vine' or 'Lane' or 'Villiers' or something very much like it – it had proved difficult to buy hearing-aid batteries of the right type in Sri Lanka. He bought a ticket at Wimbledon Tube Station and said quite specifically that he did not need a return, in spite of the saving he might have made.

The local Thai police treated each sighting with mild interest. They were aware that nobody survived more than a few days alone in the jungle and, if he was alive anywhere, it wasn't on their patch. After six months, a team from Scotland Yard had the good fortune to be sent to Thailand to help the police with their investigations. They stayed as long as they could and were interviewed several times on local and international television. One of the policemen got sunburn and one contracted a sexually transmitted disease.

Then, finally, there was a genuine piece of evidence – the only one that would surface in twenty years. A fisherman at a beach resort was caught trying to sell a very expensive watch. It was inscribed: 'To Roger, with all my love, Tim'. The fisherman was arrested and was triumphantly presented to the press, in handcuffs. He claimed, however, to have bought the watch from an Englishman who said that he didn't need it any more. He was no thief, he said. He'd paid a lot of money for it – several thousand Baht – which he'd borrowed from a friend. A friend quickly emerged to confirm that he had indeed lent the fisherman money, so that he could purchase the watch at the bargain price the Englishman had named. The fisherman also found or purchased several impeccable witnesses to confirm he had been fishing, far out at sea, when Vane had vanished. After a while the suspect was quietly released, without handcuffs, to explain to his friend why he could not repay the loan in the foreseeable future. The watch remained in an evidence bag in a police station on the Thai coast, pending future investigations.

As the years passed, the sightings became fewer. The television series continued with new plots devised by various scriptwriters, as they would have done anyway. The old

episodes were repeated. Sales of the books remained steady, especially with the new television-tie-in covers. Royalties piled up in a bank account. Vane's reputation, in fact, remained high, fuelled in part by his thrilling absence. On the fifth and tenth anniversaries of his vanishing there were long pieces in the Sunday papers, speculating on what had happened, but coming up with nothing that was both credible and new. Tim Macdonald refused to be interviewed or even to appear on reality television shows. The fifteenth anniversary passed largely unnoticed. As we neared the twentieth, it was proposed that there should finally be a memorial service. And I was asked to write a biography, somewhat late in the day, to cash in on what the publisher hoped would be at least a brief renewal of interest in his books.

When I received my invitation to the service I almost declined it. It seemed strange to mourn for somebody I had never had a conversation with. But being his biographer (even though the book was far from complete) tipped the balance. I had to be there – not to lament his passing but, as the fashion now is, to celebrate his life and work. Especially when I had supplied the photograph for the order of service.

Thus it was that I was able to send the first tweet when it all kicked off. As Elsie later pointed out – one day it could be the only thing that I am still remembered for.