

PART ONE

One.

Already it was colder in the mornings. From somewhere in the distance came the report of a rifle: to introduce the sunrise, perhaps, or at least announce its imminent arrival - for the tops of the mountains were still in darkness and the bowl of the valley below might have lived in its gloom for ever. But a shot there certainly was: a low velocity sort of sound whose echo boomed away lazily into the hills. Then the usual peace of the mountains returned. As the sky lightened, the outline of the summits began to be seen. A cock crowed down in the bowl of darkness without much conviction; a dog barked listlessly while another answered it from across the valley; and the morning heaved itself up over the mountain tops and announced the arrival of the new day.

At the cabin on the mountainside nothing moved. The log hut raised four-square on stilts of stone might have been long uninhabited. But at each end, beneath a deep eave of the shingled roof, small game was hanging and on a brief verandah below one of the eaves some rudimentary laundry drifted from a line. Under the line, and fed from a pipe carrying rain-water from the steeply pitched roof, a buxom and handsomely-staved barrel sat primly on a low stage of flat stones, as if it were awaiting a long delayed proposal of marriage.

Kelso found the World Service after a search for a frequency that wasn't jammed. The morning news led on the latest developments in the Pollitt Plot. After twelve weeks of investigative detention, charges of treason had now been brought, but more charges were confidently expected. Officials had hinted that the case could be linked to the long-dead affair of Cohen and her

accomplice Petrovsky. The offer of the distinguished jurist Pritt to defend the accused pro bono publico had been accepted. Then something about American cocaine smuggling to finance an espionage ring in the highest reaches of the Protectorate. An investigation was under way and developments could be expected shortly. But the radio did not say how shortly. There was something about church bells and religious agitation too, by unregistered and illegal sectaries. And there were amendements to the emergency powers legislation of 1946. Registered clergy were no longer to be exempt from forced-labour service outwith a radius of 200 miles from their place of domicile.

Then the weather. In London there had been the worst November fog since the Armistice. Those cinemas and theatres still open had closed their doors as patrons had been unable to see the screen or stage. In the streets pedestrians had been unable to see the pavements, and Militia patrols had been doubled in those areas of the capital which were still disaffected. A bitter December and January, with much snow, was expected. And finally, some sporting news: football scores from the provinces, a much-fancied three-year-old destroyed after a bad tumble, a boxing match stopped in the thirteenth round.

A clatter of ponies gave warning of a party of guards coming downhill on the rough path that curved from the higher slopes and on past the timber hut down into the valley. The soldiers had their carbines shouldered. They were leading the beasts by the reins for the path was steep and dangerous, and a fall might be fatal to man or mount. At the stout timber barrel men and ponies watered themselves. Someone offered a crude joke at which the rest laughed; and then they went on.

One of the beasts carried a republican partisan lashed across its back. A head-shot at close range, by the look of the damage. Kelso watched the party move down the track and disappear into the trees. The guards were relaxed now, after the rigours of the night and the terror of patrol in the partisan-infested hills.

Down in the valley, all was as silent as the hills and the blue passes that twisted smokily into them. Kelso checked this blue silence with a scope, and ran the instrument with some care over the blank face of the inn below, from whose pole, extending out into the miniature plaza, the state flag stretched with its accustomed honour. But there was nothing; no signal, nothing to be seen, no sign of any kind.

He breakfasted on coffee and crude brandy: food could wait. Now the radio was reporting the ongoing collectivisation in Kent, despite the wrecker opposition of rich apple-farmer elements. Barn-burning and stock-slaughter were henceforth to be capital offences, with immediate effect. The new Yeomanry had already hanged a dozen saboteurs in Shropshire. Militarisation of labour had been authorised in key industrial sectors, following sabotage and strikes in mining and steel. Anti-state criminality on the railways was to be from Christmas Day also a capital offence. A transport of political criminals was to be shipped soon from the port of Leith. And there was continuing partisan trouble in some areas of London. Details were scant, but police and Militia stations had been attacked by elements described by a reporter as anarchist Daniels. Some had died in the course of attempting to avoid arrest.

An easy studio debate followed. A professor said the criminals drew their inspiration from a text in the biblical book of the same name. What was it, someone wanted to know?

The professor said: 'God has numbered thy kingdom and finished it. Though art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians'.

Everyone laughed, an easy early-morning studio laugh.

'Of course Daniels is just a general name for them', the professor added. 'There are dozens of sects, all at each other's throats. Fifth Monarchists, New Diggers and Mumblers are the biggest'.

Wasn't all this nonsense from the nineteenth century, somebody wondered, anarchism was big then? Seventeenth century for the most part, the professor said, though the Mumblers were really fourteenth, they never gave up: and everyone laughed again, and then continuity cut in with some more of the cricket scores and the morning rolled on.

Kelso again played his scope over the dull facade of the inn down in the valley below. The flag that had earlier drifted over the plaza had gone. It was time to move.

It took him half an hour to make his way down to the floor of the valley and into the scattering of buildings that formed the hamlet there. Of the soldiers of the morning, there was no sign; perhaps they had already set off for their barracks. In the entrance to the inn the floor was of beaten black earth. A large guard-dog, infinitely black and seemingly unconscious, lay sprawled below a life-size crucifix which had been splashed with scarlet paint and lashed to the rough-stone wall with strips of leather.

'They shot a partisan', the innkeeper said, 'I will have to return the flag to its place of honour. There is a truck going down the valley later. But there will be time for a drink first of all'.

They retired to a parlour in the back of the building. The innkeeper disappeared to return the flag to its pole. He left Kelso with a bottle of clear home-made firewater that someone had carried over the mountain. In perfect silence the black hound crept into the room and lay at his feet. The innkeeper returned just as silently.

‘You are to go to the coast. They will tell you the rest there’.

‘Was he dead?’, Kelso asked.

‘Alive’, the innkeeper said, ‘but it would be better if he had died. Perhaps he will be lucky and die on the way to the barracks. They will say he tried to escape from custody’.

His woman appeared from the interior of the house with food. ‘The filth’ she said, ‘they take their revenge. And is the se— or lonely in his cabin on the mountain?’

She had brought shellfish soup: strange items from the seashore, drowned in an orange liquid. The severed head of a langoustine tilted eerily in the brew. Then she took them a stew of trotter and white beans; there were no goats left, she said, the soldiers had stolen the last one. She hoped the little girl had died easily. The hostess cackled viciously at her witticism. But there was, she added, a bottle of wine to wash down the stew.

When she had retired, the innkeeper said, ‘I have listened to the radio. There is trouble coming in England’.

‘What trouble?’

‘Nobody knows. But someone or something is coming. Perhaps an American invasion. Something is going to happen soon anyway’.

At length they heard a truck grinding down into the valley. A flatback with a sentry-box cab came into view and halted below the

flagpole of the inn. The driver spat: the black hound snarled, but shrank into its doorway.

‘Good luck’, the innkeeper said; and they began their journey onwards to the coast.

The driver had the accent of the northern mountains. His home was further back in the hills. But since the fascist rising and the civil war, he had worked down in the city. Twice a week, sometimes three, he carted fish up over the pass to the towns on the meseta, and took farm-meat back down. And carried messages between the partisan bands that still teemed in the mountains.

He said, ‘The fascists have very dangerous roadblocks. It is extremely important to have good papers. Or that could be the end of it’.

Kelso said that he had very good papers.

It took an hour to reach the first roadblock. The guards were very drunk but entirely civil. Beyond, the winding gear of a mine peered grimly over a village; beyond that again, the spire of a ruined convent church tilted. The walls of the church were plastered with political slogans and sexual crudities. The guards with their strange accents were from the far south, and they hated these hills, these people. Their hatred was palpable, instantly dangerous. Still, they caused no trouble and the little flatbed was waved on. But behind it a heliograph flashed in the morning sun, handing down the valley the notice of its coming.

At length, the steep and narrow passage began to flatten and widen into a vale which gave home to a multitude of small-scale dairy farms. The landscape was pitted with cheap concrete pill-boxes. On the tops of the larger boxes heavy machine guns were mounted but they were, in the afternoon heat, deserted. Suddenly

the sea could be seen in the distance. For a second it seemed to lift and shift. Perhaps it was an illusion, or merely a storm: it was too far to see with any certainty.

They approached the town. Further roadblocks slowed progress, but did not halt it. The railway station looked as if it had been bombed or shelled, but at quite some time in the past.

‘Gijon’, the driver said, ‘this is where I will leave you’.

They drove through the town to the port. The sea could now clearly be seen. It was blue and smooth to the horizon. Perhaps the storm had indeed been an illusion: or perhaps it had gone elsewhere. The stone piers extended at angles to each other, in the cause of offering protection to sheltering vessels. Two small ships were loading coal. Out in the roadstead, a much larger ship lay at lazy anchor. Even now, there were signs of the old fighting: but dusty, somehow, as if it were all safely in the past. Beyond the port, a low hill was fortified with gun emplacements facing out to sea, and heavily armoured.

The driver said, ‘In case your Royal Navy attacks us’: and he laughed, the humour barely concealing some unstated but very bitter spirit of absurdity.

‘Our newspapers say the English navy has no shells and no fuel now. Do you think this is true?’

They growled round the base of the fortified hilltop and swung through the narrow streets of the old town. Then they passed through a sunlit square of tilting houses and filigree-iron balconies. Curtains stirred in some faint afternoon breeze: a suggestion, perhaps, of leisurely infamy within.

Where is everyone, Kelso thought: and the driver, answering the thought, said, 'Everyone is asleep, later it will become busy again'.

It was a custom almost impossible to become used to; and even harder to break. They found a much grander square in the newer part of the town; at one end an unsightly church commanded the breadth of the place.

'Find a bar for an hour first', the driver said. 'When the bells ring, you are to make your meeting in there. I hope you have luck'.

Kelso found his bar in an alley just off the square. He was the only customer. Perhaps all the other customers were still asleep. A giant of a man appeared from behind a beaded curtain, and served him glasses of an indeterminate liquor. But it kicked very hard indeed. A thin array of sweetmeats was scattered on the counter. They appeared to have been there for some time, but Kelso picked in a disconsolate way at a dark and heavily spiced sausage, and some bread, equally dark and heavy. Each was surprisingly good.

When the bells of the church announced themselves with a clangorous din, he made his way there. The doors of the church appeared to have been built in the cause of withstanding an armed attack; perhaps on the mysteries and secrets they enclosed. Long lists of names had been engraved on either side of these doors, in resolute stone: jesuits, lawyers, capitalists. One child too, a female child. But there were no names for the republican dead, of course.

The interior was a blizzard of golds and reds, of swirling avenging saints and androgynous angels. The congregation was small, but mightily pious. Then the service began. Not long after the start, a boy appeared at his side and said that he was to take the stranger to his mother. As simply as that. They left.

By now it was dark. The town was dimly lit. The boy took Kelso by alleyways into the old part again, to a second-floor garret where his mother was. She had prepared a meal, but as she began to serve it the electricity died. She lit an oil lamp and served the food. Trotters and white beans again. She shrugged: what else could anyone expect these days? The electricity returned, and by its light and that of the lamp, they completed their dining. Then the women went out with the child; it would not be for long, she said.

At length she returned, just as the electricity failed again. She had his instructions. He was required to return to England at once. She did not know why, but there was big trouble coming. There was time for a sleep, perhaps, but before it was daylight she would have him taken out to the ship.

The woman said, 'We have a radio'; and at once switched on the set. The London correspondent of the state service was coming to the end of his weekly report. All remaining tractors in England and Wales were to be confiscated, except by special permission. They were to be shipped east from Cardiff and Newcastle and Tilbury. Most of the tractors in Scotland had already gone. A purge of the universities, and an audit of the university libraries, was expected to begin shortly. New penalties had been introduced for black-marketeering in nylon stockings, chocolates and perfumes. And the Home Secretary had called for 'urgent and merciless' action against narcotics smuggling into the Protectorate.

Kelso sought and found another frequency on the radio. A woman was singing with wild and desperate passion: he came in a boat of foreign name, I met him in the port one night, when the white lighthouse, over the sailing ships, its silver kiss let gently fall.

Another lover, one more love affair. It ended badly, of course, the good ones seldom fail to. Or perhaps it was a good ending: certainly, they never met again, in the port or beyond it. But in her breast for ever, she carried that mariner's name, carved on her coldening heart:

El vino en un barco
De nombre extranjero
Lo encontré en el puerto
Un anochecer
Cuando el blanco faro
Sobre los veleros
Su beso de plata
Dejaba caer.

The song seemed to drone on without end: but it was time to sleep. They would come for him during the night, and after that there would not be much time for sleep at all.