

Ten.

They came into Edinburgh shortly before daybreak on Christmas Eve. Overnight, Kelso had been moved across country by car, without headlights but on roads so bad that their absence hardly mattered anyway. Kelso drove; the maid sat beside him, cradling a short-barrel semi-automatic with great expertise. Half a dozen times, they drew quietly into side-tracks and abandoned farm-steadings and listened to the night in silence. On each occasion, they could hear high above the drone of a light aircraft. The maid said that spotter planes overflew the territory every night, but never altered their schedule: and were not in any case likely to detect a car driving slowly, without lights, on the most minor of back roads. Nor would they run into any police patrols. And - whatever might be going on in other parts of the country - this was one part of it where they could still trust their own policemen!

In time, they turned into the yard of a farm. A dog barked and was swiftly silenced. The presence of other animals was sensed, somehow; though the low sighs of cattle penned for the night was to be heard once or twice. A door at the back of the house was held half-open briefly and there was a muttered discussion: and then Kelso was led into an old-style parlour, lit with a portable oil-lamp, and in the corner of which a tall clock ticked with measured gloom. The maid disappeared with the portable lamp while Kelso was left in the darkened and ticking parlour. Then a frightful racket of poultry was to be heard. His guide returned with the lamp shortly afterwards. She carried two roosters by their feet: their necks, broken or strangled, hung without hope, and trailed gay crowns on the dusty boards.

The farmer at length appeared. He had been shaving, perhaps on account of his visit to the city. He wore heavy boots and moleskin trousers, and a boldly striped shirt with a waistcoat over it. He produced mugs of tea, and fired into each of them a stout shot of some pungent booze from a tiny bottle concealed at the back of the ominous clock. Then there was nothing but the hiss of the lamp and the slow click tick click of the clock.

‘We better go’, the farmer said at length, ‘there will be very heavy snow later today’.

The waggon was already loaded, and the farmer hand-cranked it into life with low curses, which set the dogs barking again. There was still no sign of daylight at all. Then they left, both men in the cab, with the tiny bottle of booze for company, and headed for the city. Kelso wondered if perhaps he should conceal himself in the back, but the farmer said this wasn’t at all necessary. There would be no road blocks, there never were, except for surprise ones, and they were always in the afternoon. And so they drove on, the farmer’s principal dog perched between them with a proprietorial style tempered by respect for the presence of a stranger. At length the curves of the Pentlands began to be seen faintly against the sky, and they came in by Fairmilehead and began the long shallow run down into the city. And it had indeed begun to snow.

At Tollcross the farmer off-loaded some of his vegetables and eggs for early shops, and then swung up towards the infirmary for another delivery. By now it was just beginning to get light and early workers were on the move in the unlit streets.

‘Best howf in Edinburgh’, the farmer announced, as they drove past Sandy Bell’s and down Forrest Row. Great coils of barbed wire

protected the entrance to the National Library and at the High Street junction the farmer said: 'That's what they did to the cathedral'.

St. Giles appeared to have been badly bombed, and much of the west entrance was rubble and tumbled ruins. Fires flickered from the shattered interior.

'Deportees', the farmer said. 'Runaways from industrial conscription and religious anarchists. They stay in there during the night'.

Kelso said, 'What happened to the cathedral?'

'The Bishop Riots', his driver said. 'Honest presbyterians stormed the building during the induction of the Government Bishop'.

The farmer sighed with pleasure at the recollection of all this righteous violence.

'They took away a statue in the High Street and put another one in its place. Then they tried to put in the Bishop. So we stripped him naked and drove him down the High Street backwards on a donkey, wearing a dunce's cap'.

It wasn't till afterwards that people realised the tongue had been torn out of the bishop with a pair of surgeon's pincers borrowed from the infirmary, and that his ears had been scalped as trophies - some people said the medical students were to blame, which was why they had closed the medical faculty at the university. Then every one of the righteous had got drunk. That was when the Militia, backed-up by artillery units from the Specials riot police, had attacked a mass meeting in the cathedral. People said most of the presbyterians died in the defence of the building: but before they did, they set fire to as much of it as they could.

‘Quite right too’, the farmer added in tones of stern outrage, ‘better in ruins than let these bastards get hold of it’.

‘They didn’t call themselves Daniels by any chance?’, Kelso wondered diffidently.

The collie, which had been silent and still for some time, seemed to flex its shoulders, and a soft rage whispered somewhere deep in the throat.

‘Daniels! These people aren’t presbyterians! These people don’t respect any sort of authority at all!’, the farmer cried, as if scenting an old sectary that he couldn’t quite identify. ‘We don’t have them here!’

He gave his passenger a look of extreme acuity but thought his warning adequate to the moment, and said no more. They turned up into the High Street, and near the top stopped to offload more produce. At a lofty window a light glowed twice in the falling snow: the driver removed and replaced his cap twice: and they plunged down behind the castle.

By the time they had reached their destination the day had risen. In a closed-off street surrounded by tenement buildings, a pavement-market was already under way, selling foodstuffs and bric-a-brac from a hundred tables, stalls, barrows and upturned boxes. The farmer said he would get rid of the rest of his stuff here; sooner or later they would clamp down on free street-trading, once they had the rationing system good and tight, and he didn’t know what he would do then for a living: because by God, they weren’t going to take the stuff from him by force - it could rot in the ground or the furthest corner of Hell before they did that!

Over the roofs of the tenements in the middle distance, the lattice floodlight towers of a football ground could be seen. Towards

the top of each tower, an open-fronted guard cabin had been established, and uniformed men were to be observed. In the snow, somehow, they seemed darkly ominous.

'It is better not to ask any questions', the farmer said. 'They have taken it over as an emergency detention station. It is supposed to be run by the religious police, but nobody is sure. Nobody knows what goes on inside, but they are supposed to be dangerous prisoners. Sometimes you can hear gunfire but nobody will talk about it. The shipment that was torpedoed out off the Bass was held here before they took the men down to Leith'.

'I thought it was a storm', Kelso said.

'That's what they claimed', the farmer said. 'But a torpedo bomber sunk it after the crew had taken to the boats. People on shore saw it happen, even saw a destroyer pick up the boats afterwards'.

'Is it safe here?', Kelso wondered: and the farmer said that it was very safe.

'There are raids sometime for black-marketeers, they maybe pick up one or two people for parasitism, but you can usually buy them off. Nobody is going to look for political enemies in a place like this. They would have to arrest everybody! Stay here, and I will get the stuff out of the back'.

A girl in a raincoat was hawking fifty-tins of Capstan cigarettes through the market. As quick as the eye could follow, tins and cash changed hands. The girl never once looked around, or lifted her eyes from the immediate business in hand. Still, she worked closer and closer, and at length affected to notice Kelso in the cab. She came very close.

She said, 'Come to the other end of the market in ten minutes'.

She did not bother to offer him cigarettes but turned and disappeared at once into the growing crowd. At the near end of the market, the produce was all foodstuffs and clothing of the cheapest sort. Some stalls sold footwear too, rubbish imported from the fraternal economies in the east, and doubtless stolen somewhere, on its passage to legitimate buyer. And someone was offering for sale a sad collection of tiny Christmas trees: small, stunted things that might have been stolen from a public park. They were already decorated with the cheapest sort of trinkets - crudely painted cardboard angels, mainly.

But at the far end of the street, the stalls gave way to suitcases and holdalls, from which the detritus of the Protectorate spilled. One trader had a case of litre bottles of naval vodka. On each bottle, the same flaxen girls in scarlet neckerchiefs marched bare-legged from the the splendid corn. A second trader offered pornographic magazines and gangster comics priced in dollars, while a third touted a collection of cap badges and belt buckles from the stores department of the Soviet Air Force. A crone with eyes like stone was offering rolls of silk for sale. An expensive sort of man in an expensive suit and protected by two minders was offering to buy and sell ration cards. A sad and hungry-looking boy was offering for sale a woman's fur overcoat and a good-quality pair of stout shoes. Two young girls in thin cotton dresses and bare feet had a cardboard box of kitchen cutlery on offer, along with a small but very devout technicolour picture of the Madonna and an amateur sepia snapshot of a young serviceman and his bride.

After a time the man trading in ration cards bargained with these girls and when he left, they left in his company. The boy with his

mother's coat and shoes for sale stared after them, with infinite and hopeless hatred. Then the minders came back and bought this coat and these shoes: and when they left, the boy went with them, still with his fixed expression of perfect hatred.

The girl hawking Captsan took Kelso to a third-floor flat overlooking the football ground. She said that he should wait there until she returned. Then she left.

The flat had two tiny rooms, one of which served as a kitchen. In a recess in the same room was a slovenly bed, curtained. There was some food too, and drink: but not much of either. A shelf held a collection of Huxley's novels in paperback, a cheap radio, and two copies of a journal called Ottoman Studies. There were also half a dozen nautical charts of the west coast, an admiralty pilot book for the same waters, and some out of date copies of the Scotsman.

Kelso leafed through the charts. One large-scale chart of the Firth of Lorne had been heavily worked over, in soft pencil. In the mouth of Loch Feochan, someone had written 'too shallow'. On the east side of Seil, the same hand had scrawled at the mouth of Balvicar bay 'not for neaps'. And then again, 'dinghy possible right to the bridge'. A series of parallel lines was stretched across Cuan sound with the warning 'dangerous tides!' At the north end of Seil, a pencilled arrow led into a gut and someone - a different hand altogether - had written, 'possible but no road'. On the west side of Luing, at Glassford just south of Cullipool, the same hand had written, 'jetties, slip and boathouse but terrible tides'. Also, in very black letters, 'fallback at Baramore-Shona'. An arrow pointed north towards the sound of Mull. And someone had circled the islet of Easdale in a very thick black line of pencil indeed.

In the early evening the snow began to fall more heavily than ever and shortly afterwards it got dark. Kelso found the tail-end of a news programme on the radio. The city police were appealing for assistance. A young woman on her way to Edinburgh from Belfast had disappeared. She had last been seen on the Larne to Stranraer ferry that morning. And then a few sports reports. Nothing more.

There was some light from a poor gas fire: Kelso did not think it wise to attempt to bring to any sort of life the unshaded bulb that loitered insolently from the ceiling. For an hour, in any case, it was quite bright in the room, as there were streetlights to be seen across the city: but then they were extinguished as the curfew began. Only the floodlights of the little camp glowed brightly down on their anonymous collection of grey and silent huts, and the snow could be seen to sweep past the tall windows of the flat. A patrol of Militia armoured cars prowled in the street below, their heavy wheels leaving deep impressions in the snow. One drove on, the second parked on the corner of the street.

Suddenly there was activity at the left-hand end of the football-stadium. Six men were digging a trench with long-handled shovels. Sentries in greatcoats, with elegant bayonets fixed on their rifles, stood around smoking cigarettes and stamping their heavily-booted feet. The armoured car was still on the corner of the street.

There was a volley of shots from the stadium. One man with a long-handled shovel was re-filling the trench that had been dug. Then he was led away by the sentries, who seemed keen to return to the warmth of their accommodations deep in the bowels of the stand. Soon, no more than a line of dark, turned earth marked the passing of the others' recent presence. And soon the snow would cover it.

It was much later when the girl who had hawked Capstan returned with colonel Jack. Kelso heard nothing, nothing whatsoever - no vehicle below in the street, no footfall on the stairs, no turn of a lock. At one moment, he was alone in the grim little flat - and the next the girl and colonel Jack were there too.

'Kelso', the old man exclaimed, enveloping the visitor in greatcoat and gloves. 'Welcome home!'

The girl looked at Kelso with open scorn. The colonel had brought a bottle of whisky and three glasses. The girl said at once that she didn't want any. The old man poured two very large shots of the liquor.

He said to Kelso, 'It's malt, the very best. This weather is a curse, and everyone says it is going to get worse'.

The men killed their whisky, and the colonel poured some more almost at once. The reek of peat filled the flat: for one insane moment, Kelso wondered if the gas-fire might ignite the fumes and blow their tenement to fiery pieces.

'It's twenty years old', the colonel said. 'All the way from Jura. The distillery was requisitioned last year, but the chaps managed to keep some of the best stuff'.

An uneasy silence lay on the company while the fire hissed and flickered. The colonel sat uneasily on the alcove bed while Kelso moved to the window.

At length Kelso said, 'Why have you brought me here, colonel?'

Somewhere in the near distance, a set of church bells began to ring - a shameless, shocking, aggressive thunder of noise through the snow. Then a second set of bells began to thunder, much closer. And then a dozen other sets, roaring defiance into the night

and snow. After the earlier silence, the noise seemed deafening, outrageous somehow.

Kelso said, 'Christ, what a noise. I thought they were illegal'.

'Not tonight', the colonel said. 'It's a concession for tonight only. Christmas eve, you see'.

'They are closing them down for good next week', the girl said. 'They call church-bells a provocation. They have started to confiscate them already, for melting down'.

After a time, though the bells still rang furiously across the rooftops, a hundred sets together perhaps, or even more, the noise seemed to lessen.

Kelso said, 'So why have you brought me here?'

The colonel looked deeply into his whisky glass.

Then he said, 'Cocaine, Kelso, the best cocaine the Americans can send us. You have done this sort of work before and we need you to do it again. Just once. We want you to collect a shipment and deliver it for us'.

Down in the street, the Militia riot car turned on its lights and began to move cautiously forward. For some long moments these lights slowly moved across the face of a wall on which someone had painted with great care the legend:

V25-28: Mene Mene Tekel Parsin

'How much cocaine?'

'That depends on what they send us'.

'Where does it come in?'

'That depends on the Americans'.

'And when do you expect it to arrive?'

'We don't know that either until the last minute'.

There was for some time an immense silence in the flat, though the bells still rolled in triumph across the city.

‘Do they know I am here?’, Kelso asked at length, as if the matter were of no more than academic interest.

‘They know someone has come in’, the colonel said, ‘and they have started to look. Sooner or later, they will know who it is. And then they will come after you with a vengeance’.

‘And what are you going to do with the cocaine, colonel?’

‘We are going to swap it for George VI and his family, swap it for the king and his queen and his princesses’

‘But George VI is dead. And his family too’.

‘Not yet, Kelso. But we don’t have much time’.

‘Anyway, good coke never goes to waste’, the girl said. ‘Don’t you worry about it’.

The colonel stood up, his body tilted to compensate for the leg left at Sari Bair all those years ago.

He said, ‘I better go. I am booked on tonight’s sleeper from Waverley, I have to be in London tomorrow’.

He gave Kelso a bundle of notes, very dirty but certainly American dollars.

He said, ‘five hundred now and as much as you need later’.

‘And what about Kelly?’, Kelso asked.

‘Kelly’, the girl said with a sneer. ‘She’s the bait in your trap - and here you are’.

‘I’ve come a long way to see her’, Kelso said.

‘She comes over from Belfast on the Larne to Stranraer ferry’, the colonel said. ‘She is the only one who knows when and where the shipments come in. She should have been here by now’.

'But she isn't', the girl said. 'That's her the police are looking for. It was on the radio earlier, the girl who has disappeared'.

'Disappeared', Kelso said.

'It has suddenly become very dangerous', the colonel said. 'We didn't expect them to be on to us as quicky as this'.

'Sandy Bell's', the girl said. 'If there is trouble here, go there or the Greyfriars churchyard, until someone picks you up'.

All across the city, the sound of church bells in the snow seemed more deafening, more defiant, more thunderous than ever.