

Two.

A heavy bank of fog lay over London all day. By the late afternoon, it was still very thick in Westminster and it swirled around the parliament buildings and the ruins of the Abbey. Colonel Jack stood in the murk, acutely aware that Daniel outlaws roamed the streets in heavy fog. There were no taxis to be seen, or heard. Then a Daniel girl from the burned shell of St. Margaret's took pity on him. She plunged into the darkness, and soon returned with a cab. She held out a silent hand and opened her mouth to show where a heretical tongue had been torn from its roots. The colonel gave her a pound-note and the girl disappeared in silence.

Underground services through the city centre were suspended on account of a partisan bomb attack that morning, the driver said. There had been half a dozen bazooka attacks south of the river earlier in the day too, he added.

'The partisans discovered how to make them from truck-axles last summer', he said, 'but they are a lot more powerful now'.

'I think it's safer to call them terrorists'.

'That's what I mean to say, sir. Terrorists'.

The driver surmised that his passenger was one of the Scotch MPs going up to his northern constituency for the weekend. He had a sister who was married to one of them, he said, but he'd never been there himself. And people said it had been the worst fog since the Armistice. Still, it wouldn't last much longer now: though everyone knew it was going to be a bitter winter!

By the time they were approaching King's Cross, the fog was thinning a little, though it was still very dense. Jack paid-off the driver and limped his way into the station. The ticket office and

tearooms were jammed with arrivals, and passengers whose departures were in various degrees impending. A brass and accordion Militia band entertained. Some travellers watched it sideways, with mixed expressions of admiration and hatred.

At the ticket-desk there was a delay due to the slow progress of the queue. Then there was a credentials check in operation at the platform barrier, but it did help to be an honourable member bound for one's constituency, and Jack got through quickly. When he found his coach and compartment, he left overcoat and travelling case on the rack above a reserved first-class seat and made his way to the buffet. A pair of evening papers carried reports of the attacks earlier in the day: grenades, they said, playing-down the story. But they would anyway, it was something of a wonder that the story had made it into the newspapers at all.

In the buffet there was no good food of any kind to be had. People said the best of it was being shipped off east. Nothing could be seen to drink either, except imported beer. But the barman had a private store of whisky for valued customers, and he managed four fingers in a tumbler with tap water. Ice, of course, was a thing of the past.

On the platform two uniformed policemen were searching through the crowd, shouldering aside all-comers. Two plainclothes chaps were with them. The constables suddenly found the elderly commuter for whom they were looking. The taller of the two plainclothes men slammed a heavy brogue into the old man. As he staggered the younger chap neatly toppled him off balance, and when he fell the first slammed the black brogue onto the point of his nose. A constable politely took possession of the old man's suitcase, opened it and emptied the contents onto the platform.

Perhaps thirty brown-paper packages lay innocently on the concrete. The first of the plainclothes men smashed his polished brogue through these poor packages and they exploded in a cloud of white dust. It might almost have been refined sugar or fine-milled flour. The second plainclothes chap knelt without reverence and smeared a tipful of powder around his gums.

For a fraction of a moment, the prostrate old man turned his head on the platform and caught Jack's eye. He looked as if he might cry out for help. But he remained entirely mute. The party of policemen gathered together the undamaged packages, and left them in a neat pile. The old man appeared to be unconscious. Someone picked up his neatly rolled umbrella, looked round disconsolately, and laid it down again on the dirty concrete. The cloud of dust rose and puffed, and then settled gently on the coats of the surrounding commuters. They brushed and fussed and stepped aside, until the cloud subsided.

The barman said sternly, and very quietly, 'It's everywhere these days, sir'.

Colonel Jack said, 'They should be shot, these people!'.

'They are, sir, all the time. But it doesn't stop anybody. You wouldn't believe the sorts who are dealing in it now. Using it too, sir'.

And then, very loudly indeed, the barman said brightly, 'Manage another one, sir? We could be starting any moment. We might get ourselves over the Border in time for breakfast with any luck'.

Then the train took its departure, and it clanged and swayed through the grey suburbs while the bar filled slowly with customers. Later, as they drew out of the city and into open farming countryside,

low rivers of flame could be seen on the horizon to either side of the track.

‘Are they burning the stubble?’, Jack asked the barman.

The barman looked grim. In a low voice he said, ‘Some people say the farmers are setting fire to their barns and stackyards rather than hand over the grain’.

Jack said, very quietly, ‘I should think that is an extremely dangerous thing to be heard saying at the moment’.

‘I didn’t think you would mind sir, considering everything’, the barman said humbly.

A security unit finished a sweep of the train and repaired to the bar. Accent and manner were impeccable; but everyone in the bar knew at once who the four men were, and what they were. A strained half-silence developed in a gentle way, as if afraid to declare itself. Sheets of flame flared in the far darkness, while the wheels roared and sang into the north. Then the flames simply went out, and there was little to see but the gaunt framework of mature woodlands against the sky.

Colonel Jack made his way through the packed corridors towards his coach. Many of the standing passengers were carrying supplies of potatoes in netting sacks. The second-class compartments were each crammed with ten or a dozen occupants, and the racks above them were jammed with luggage. There was some identity of common purpose or style of community about these people which puzzled Jack briefly. Then he remembered what the barman had said; the train was carrying three hundred teachers emigrated to road-building projects in the north. The barman had said ‘deported’ at first but had then thought the better of the word. All things considered, emigrated was a much safer word.

But by the first-class coaches there was a sober spirit of calm and relative comfort. Some Friday nights, pairs of Fraternalists with rifles and bayonets were stationed aboard; but tonight, there was no sign of any of them. It seemed unlikely that they had been withdrawn and returned home: though one never heard anything these days of conditions in their own countries.

Later - probably much later, he supposed - he woke to find that the train had halted. The new day was dawning without much enthusiasm. Unimpressive hills bound the rough valley in which the line ran, with scrub oak scattered across their brows. On the other side of the valley, the main north-south road ran. All headlamps blacked-out, a column of armour was grinding uphill; the outline of the commanders could just be seen, standing bolt upright in their turret-hatches. At first the tanks moved in silence, but at length the harsh roar of the engines and tracks could be heard. Towards the rear of the column came a mobile anti-aircraft battery. The faces of the searchlights stared at the train with blind menace, while the muzzles snouted at the skies.

Up ahead, the twin locomotives were taking water. By the time the armoured column was over the hill, they had finished. The train restarted: and when it was up to speed the security men from the previous evening's bar were again combing its corridors. Two did their work in the compartment, while the remaining pair stood in the corridor, passive but watchful. They searched Jack's luggage in a perfunctory way, and had the grace to apologise in advance.

'What is this?', one of them asked.

'Ottoman Studies'.

'I can see that, sir. But why do you have it in your luggage?'

'I am on the editorial board. Perhaps you would care to inspect the contents page. The text isn't in English, I am afraid, but there is a translated abstract at the end'.

This satisfied them. But they did not overlook his papers, of course; emergency regulations identity card (internal passport, by any other name), food ration-card and residence-permission card, military officer-rank pardon (always a suspicious one, that), and parliamentary privilege pass (that brought them up, though not too much, they were very professional). And of course his letter of introduction to all members of the Protectorate's security services, confirming his membership of the Home Secretary's standing panel on narcotics and espionage. Personally signed by the Home Secretary himself, in bright blue ink. That one really brought them up.

'Is there a problem?', the colonel asked.

'We don't know', the hardest of them replied a little unwillingly. 'A bandit network has called a leadership conference. Maybe in Scotland. That's all we have for the moment'.

Jack said yes, he had heard that there was reason to believe that something was expected. There was even a possible connection to American cocaine smuggling rings. He wished the security men good luck and they swayed down the corridor of the rushing train, while the colonel watched them go without expression.

The day had risen by now. At the head of the train the locomotives were pouring full-power smoke and steam as they hurtled through the towns and villages of the coast. In the rich farming country on either side of the track, stooped labour-gangs scavenged ears of corn from the frosty stubble, while ancient single-furrow ploughs were dragged by villages of men and women. A ship

was lying hove-to off Leith, perhaps waiting for high water and the docks. Then the volcanic slabs of the city hills came into view, and the train was swinging, slower and slower, into the eastern suburbs.

At Waverley, no taxis were available. Jack walked to his little town-house up on the High Street, directly opposite the burned cathedral, and made some telephone calls to his constituency. It was perfectly clear that someone, somewhere, was listening; that was to be expected nowadays. But they couldn't watch everyone all the time, after all. There was still some risk in making his way to the port district. But there was hardly any option.

He lunched in a bar down towards Holyrood Palace. Knox was back on his plinth in the High Street. The authorities had removed the statue at the time of the Bishop Riots: some people said it was that removal which had really started them. In front of the palace drafts of penal-conscription recruits for heavy labour gangs were drilling under the guard of a Militia training unit. The barman said the recruits were all minor first-offenders from the professions, and would only serve six months laying railway track. The barman thought there was a lot to be said for it: a good old-fashioned crack of the whip for people who hadn't done an honest day's graft in their entire lives! In the bar every wall boasted a recruiting poster for the Specials. The barman was thinking about joining the Specials himself.

He said, 'Full-time if I can get in. They've just doubled the wages, sir, and there's perks and bonuses on top'.

When Jack had finished lunch, he made his way back up the High Street, down North Bridge, and round by the side of Calton Hill. It was clear that he was not being followed. Now, it was only a short walk to the meeting place.

The port district was under military control and was heavily defended, though swarms of dock-thieves were said to break-in every day and break-out again every night. In any case the house lay outside the barriers that enclosed the district, though it was close enough for them to be seen from its windows.

It was a spacious apartment of finely-proportioned rooms, with ostentatious cornices and splendid oaken doors. One entire wall of the dining room was given over to rare books, arranged and labelled by shelf, in Arabic and Persian and early and modern Turkish. A merchant's house in older and more prosperous times, perhaps: a merchant, or a house, with a bent for trade and the scholastic.

Leith Walk was peaceful, a normal city thoroughfare going about its everyday business. Men in flat caps gossiped outside pubs, women struggled homewards with shopping, commercial vehicles with exemption from the fuel rationing crawled towards their various destinations. But at three o'clock military jeeps and two half-tracks carrying heavily-armed Paramilitaries fanned down the Walk, turning the traffic onto the pavements and into the side streets. Soon afterwards a short convoy of three open-topped trucks passed, under very heavy guard. On the pavements, the shoppers and gossipers paused in their pursuits to watch the convoy as it headed for the docks. One brave man removed his cap and held it respectfully to his chest. When the convoy had passed, he replaced the cap. The gesture, somehow, seemed terribly ominous.

By teatime the editorial board of Ottoman Studies had safely assembled. Someone brought coffee, and whisky for those who wanted it, from the direction of the kitchen; and after they had talked in low voices for a while, Jack, in the gentle style of a village council, called the meeting to order. One of the visitors remained to watch

obliquely from the window; the rest, council-style, arranged themselves around the mahogany table which occupied the centre of the room.

The meeting did not last long. Publication of the journal, as everyone knew, would sooner or later be formally suspended. And anyway, there was less and less access to either paper or printers, even if suspension had not been imminent.

‘Bloody ridiculous’, someone said into a silence.

But they would continue with the membership newsletter. It was quite clear from the draft legislation that newsletters remained entirely within the law.

‘For now’, the same grumbler observed.

Jack affected not to hear this comment. They had assembled, he said, as the editorial board for both the journal and the newsletter, and the organising committee of the association. He proposed two short pieces for the letter. He would do one himself, and had the draft of another piece already with him. It was rather poor but still, perhaps it deserved such small audience as the newsletter could grant it. Short reports followed from each of the members of the committee: public meetings were of course no longer possible, and it was deemed advisable that member-only meetings be curtailed to twice a year ‘in the present circumstances’. Agreed. And the Annual General Meeting - postponed indefinitely. Accepted too. And the annual members’ outing and slightly drunken thrash - cancelled. General expressions of dismay. But yes, everyone on reflection did think that cancellation was the best response to prevailing reality.

Jack watched as the minute-taker painstakingly wrote a full minute of the meeting and signed and dated it.

‘But I wouldn’t in any way indicate the time at which the meeting started or stopped’, he advised in his gentle way.

Then there was a short recess, in which a little gossip was traded. Someone mentioned the attacks the previous day in the southern capital. For reasons unknown, they had made it into the Scotsman, in which they had been described as attacks by Daniel bandits armed with homemade bazookas. The authorities had already discovered that the hardened-steel tube had come from military repair yards in the vicinity of Chatham.

Someone asked, ‘Who are these Daniels anyway?’

‘Religious sectaries’, someone else said. ‘They won’t last long. Book of Daniel or something. God help them when they are caught’.

Someone else said that a further six detention camps, worth five thousand detainees each, were being planned for Scotland alone. But that was thirty thousand people: it did seem difficult to know where all these new detainees were to come from.

It had grown quite dark outside. The street lights were casting a dull glow across the wall of books at the end of the room.

‘Can’t we have some light?’, somebody asked: but the company elected to sit in darkness.

‘So what do we do next?’, a voice asked into the gloom. ‘We can’t stop now’.

‘We lost all our cocaine at Gorgie’, Jack said. ‘And our radio link. We lost our transport men too. But we have a friend who can transport the next shipment for us. We have called him home’.

‘When is the next shipment?’, someone asked.

‘Soon’, Jack said. ‘But we don’t know exactly when or where’.

‘How will we find out without a radio link?’, someone asked.

‘They will send someone from Belfast again, on the ferry to Stranraer’, Jack said. ‘Just as they did for the previous shipments. We think it will be the same woman’.

Somebody asked where the friend who would transport the shipment was coming from.

‘He has been in Spain’, the colonel said.

‘Do they know each other?’, someone asked.

‘During the war for a short time’, the colonel said. ‘She’s the bait, I am afraid. He wouldn’t leave Spain otherwise’.

And when would this friend be leaving, someone else wanted to know?

Jack said, ‘He is on the way already. We will bring him to Edinburgh when we can’.

‘Is he a member?’, someone wanted to know.

But the watcher at the window said, ‘It seems to be all clear. We had better get out at once, while there is time’.

And one by one, the members of the editorial committee slipped out into the night. Now, it was only a matter of waiting.