

Three.

After two days and a night the engine slowed and the thrash of the propellor dulled. To the left, through a heavy mist, the low outlines of land could be seen. A lighter was dragged out from the shore. A derrick forward transferred nondescript cargo into its open hold and the lighter returned ashore.

'Groix', the skipper growled, and rang the telegraph for slow ahead. The coaster gathered way and quite soon an estuary opened before them, with the buildings of a town behind it. In the mouth of the estuary they slowed and a pilot came smartly aboard from a launch. In the shallows out of the main channel small luggers were working lines while larger boats, rigged with tunny rods, were striding out for distant waters.

A strong tide rushed them through the narrow entrance to the harbour. A citadel stood close to starboard, the polished muzzles of modern guns clearly visible on its bastions. Opposite, banks of submarine pens could be seen; massive concrete lairs which no bomber had ever damaged. And then the port itself, thick with motor trawlers. They berthed with easy skill: a hand fore and aft hefted a monkey's fist through a few full circles and the hawsers were hauled ashore.

The skipper growled, 'You better go to the steering flat now'.

Customs officers boarded and spent an hour drinking with the skipper. They left with public cries of friendship and private salutations. In the steering flat abaft the engine it was hot: piles of rust dust lay under the chains and their quadrant. When the skipper came down to the flat, he was in good humour. A successful run for

his owners - and quite a good one on his own account too, he told Kelso expansively.

‘Every man must make a living’, he added. But he did not say what he was smuggling.

The crew, in the timeless way of crews, got off the vessel as quickly as they could. The skipper took Kelso back to the wheelhouse, and from his tiny cabin abaft it he produced a bottle of American whisky.

‘I bring for the Customs, they bring for me’, he shrugged. ‘Life goes on’.

From the wheelhouse they looked out across the dock district of the town. It had been severely bombed, and much of the damage had not yet been repaired.

‘The Boche’, the skipper said. ‘This was the Pocket. They fought like the Devil himself’. It was hard for a moment to know whose side he had been on. Apart from his own, of course.

‘At the pens, they fought there to the last man. And boy. Even when they were out of ammunition, they kept fighting. It was a massacre’.

At length a figure was observed making its way along the quay, as inconspicuous as any dockside cat. It made its way up the gangway and disappeared with the skipper to the cabin: they argued for a time: and they then both reappeared in the wheelhouse. They were clearly the greatest of friends once more.

Kelso and the cat crossed the empty quay to the ruins of a bombed grain silo: two seamen in search of lodgings, perhaps.

‘That bastard wanted dollars’, the cat-like guide said, affronted. ‘Imagine - dollars! You were expensive enough as it was’.

They flitted through the gutted skeleton of the silo and came out onto the fish-quay. Rusted sidewinders were being discharged, the fish dragged on metal-wheeled trolleys to the marketing sheds. Hard men who had not slept for a week, maybe more, watched them listlessly. The wheelhouse of one boat looked as if a giant fist had smashed it sideways.

They found a back room in a bar. A decorative mirror advertised an aniseed drink. Across this mirror, someone had sketched an obscenity in pale lipstick. A photograph showed a grinning U-boat crew, each lad with a smiling girl. The ruined silo could clearly be seen in the immediate background. A second picture showed a file of soldiers, hands upraised, being marched through the rubble of the port: again, the ruined silo could be seen in the background. So not perhaps to the last man: but the soldiers did look very young. They were bare-headed and immensely weary: but they looked straight at the camera with the confidence of victory.

‘The Americans shot them down just after that was taken’, the cat said. ‘To the last man’.

Kelso nursed his drink. Then, by way of politeness, he said, ‘What does the captain smuggle?’

‘Morphine, they say. But there is no market just now, there have been raids. They won’t pay the cops and of course there are raids, what can you expect?’

Two silent girls came in to wait for custom from the docks, or perhaps for the lads of the submarine crews who would never return. They too looked terribly weary: but they did not look at anyone or anything with the confidence of victors. After two drinks, which were on the house, they made their tired old way from the bar without once raising their eyes.

‘A friend will come soon and take you somewhere safe for the night’, the cat said. ‘Then to a house of your own for a few days, until they can get a boat to take you over’.

‘A little whisky would be helpful’, Kelso said.

‘Perhaps the friend might help’, replied the cat. ‘But I don’t think so. Unless you have dollars. You can get anything for dollars nowadays’.

‘I don’t have dollars’, Kelso said sadly.

‘Perhaps the friend might’.

‘Yes, perhaps’.

The girl came in a battleship grey traction avant, an ex-military car with the headlamps still restricted with matt black paint to a narrow slit. They drove slowly through the still-bombed town and into open countryside. From time to time the coast bent into view, flecked with white by the stern breeze. Then into farming land again, where proud peasants in berets embezzled the state and stonily watched their passing. They had to be careful, the girl said. The countryside was alive with patriots and traitors. The trick was to know one from the other. But it was a trick which was not always so easy to accomplish.

‘Perhaps’, she laughed, ‘it is the same in England now’.

That first night they found refuge in a ruined farmhouse. From the barely metalled roadway, the girl hurled the car sharp right and down a mud track to a stone building among some fierce trees. Immediately beyond the far gable, an uproar of angry and outraged screams announced a party of pigs at dinner. The girl said the pigs would give warning if the house were approached during the night.

Though the roof at the near end of the building had fallen inside its walls, there was a small room at the other end which was

habitable. When it was quite dark, the girl built and lit a small fire. Then she produced bread and cheese and two litres of wine. They dined by the light of two tall and sumptuous candles, and the poor angry glow of the fire. With some dignity, the girl proffered a makeshift bed by the fire: and reserved a second, in the opposite corner of the room, for her own occupancy.

For what seemed like hours Kelso lay waiting for the pigs to scream: but throughout the course of these waking hours, a murderous silence prevailed. Then he slept: and when he woke it was daylight, and the girl was stirring the fire into a resentful life.

‘One more drive and then it will be safe’, she said. ‘There you must stay until you are collected. Some days, perhaps’.

‘There are no dollars?’, Kelso asked politely.

‘Dollars are very precious’, she said primly. ‘We must keep them for important things’.

They drove onwards. Now they kept close to the coast, where the landscape was harder somehow, and more brutal, than it had been just a few miles to the south. A bay opened to the left, with a fishing port at its head; then a point capped with water towers and an antique semaphore station; and then a narrow inlet which opened onto a stormy sound with low land indistinct in the distance.

She said, ‘This is where they will take you from’.

They hugged the sealine; beaches of sand broken with rock and the land itself scattered with boulders as if an unexpected ice age had recently passed. She slammed the car off the sand track, ran it down over some startlingly green grass, and concealed it below a bank.

‘Walk’, she commanded. And they walked by the beach, below the line of the banks, for half a mile, until a tiny cottage,

jammed between two enormous boulders, could be seen. Just a little way before it, on the high water mark, were the ruins of an abandoned tunnyman. On some offshore rocks in the near distance the upperworks of a wrecked steamer tilted.

‘That one was supposed to have been carrying coal from the Baltic’, the girl observed. ‘But she had a cargo of Red arms for the republicans in Spain. A German submarine torpedoed her. The captain tried to beach her but he got the tide wrong. The arms were waterproofed. The maquis used to raid the hold until the Germans worked out where all the Russian weapons were coming from’.

‘There’, she added with a little flourish of triumph, ‘everything is ready for you. There is an inn in the village a mile to the north but it will be better if you stay here. It is an old customs house. You can watch from it in all directions if you wish. If there is trouble, make a signal. Leave the door of the cottage open. One of the fishermen will see and report. Then go to the tunnyman and wait. Otherwise someone will come for you when it is time for you to go to England’.

And from the cramped loft of the dwelling it was indeed possible to watch the sea and inland, across the boulder-studded plain to the point where the landscape began to roll off into invisibility. Kelso found a pair of heavy binoculars, German submarine service, and swept the view all-round with them. To seaward fishing vessels raced down-tide and others plugged up against the fierce current; open luggers, rigs furled, worked under oar around the ferocious rocks and reefs. To the south nothing was to be seen but the sand track that they had come by; while to the north, close to the sea, was the spire of a church and the cramped roofs of a settlement. Inland, coarse grass and boulders rolled

towards a rise topped by black, unfriendly trees; then there was nothing but sky.

For two days he stayed close to the cottage, patrolling the seashore in each direction and watching the relentless tide sweep through the reefs. To the north, he went as far as the outskirts of the village huddled around its spire, but he did not enter the tiny settlement, though he watched it for a time through the submariners' binoculars. A road, or at least a rough track, ran from the village to the skyline; horse-drawn carts made their quiet way there, and returned empty.

To the south there was nothing but silver curves of beach, scattered with sea-wrack, and interrupted with brief outcrops of twisted stone. On one of these beaches lay the wreck of the sailing tunnyman, which had been known, according to a nameboard, as the Bonne Espérance. Many of her planks had already gone, but the timbers were complete and sound and the stumps of masts and fishing poles were untouched. On the evening of that second day, just as it was getting dark, he saw his visitors.

He had walked in his careful way north to the outskirts of the village and was preparing to retrace his steps when he saw the flash of light on the skyline. Someone was standing beside a car, and methodically working a glass along the coast. Whoever worked it held it with purpose for a long time on the little customs cottage: or perhaps not. The glass flashed again as the upper limb of the sun sank into the ocean: now, two figures could be seen, staring down at the coast. And then their car began to move cautiously along the track towards the village.

For a little time, Kelso mused on the precise implications of this visit. And then he struck overland through the sand dunes and

boulders. It was getting dark quickly now; quite soon the spire of the church could not be seen. From boulder to boulder he moved, searching into the darkness; and when he was close to the grim trees that marched on the skyline, he turned south and worked his way for a half mile in that direction, parallel to the coast.

In the west there was still some light in the sky. As it was draining away, he saw on the edge of the beach two figures for a moment on a rise, and then they were gone. A shadow moved through the dunes towards the cottage. For a second, a light shone at the garret port from which he had swept the hinterland. Then it died. He moved closer, closer still. There were lights inside. And sounds. There was someone with a light: a torch or lamp of some sort. And low voices. The visitors were searching.

There was a long silence from the cottage now. They knew they were very close. But was the occupant close? Somewhere close at hand? More silence, then some more of the lamp. Low, urgent voices again. Will we wait until he returns and take him then? Or withdraw, leaving all just as we found it? And come back later, this time from all directions? More sound, muffled.

Ever so quickly, Kelso slid into the night, through the boulders and dunes towards the village. Stars were in the sky now. Ever so quickly, really, to a spot close to the track by which the visitors might return. Into the rushes: ever so quiet now, and ever so still. The night was perfectly still, perfectly silent.

Ages passed. In the west, the bright star of dusk was setting; to the north, the Plough was wheeling high to show Polaris in his station. And then, quite clearly, a sound. The visitors had closed the door of the cottage. A sea-bird shrieked, and a riot erupted on

the shore. Or perhaps an orgy, you couldn't tell. It all sounded as if it were many millions of years ago. And then silence again.

A dark figure was moving on the track. Then another, moving slowly in the deep sand. A muttered oath, stifled, perhaps as a salutation to the serenity of the coastal night. Ever so still, ever so silent. The figures could be clearly seen now, in coats, in heavy greatcoats. For a moment the masts and deckhouse of the wreck of good hope could be seen too; some trick of the light, perhaps. The figures passed; one, two, one, two. Soon they had disappeared into the night: for reinforcements perhaps, or to wait for the morning.

At the cottage Kelso recovered his belongings. They had been searched, no doubt about that. He jammed the cottage-door wide open with some considerable care, and quietly made his way to the wrecked Bonne Espérance on the beach. The stars had gone from the sky to seaward. A bank of fog prowled there. And soon it would be morning.