

Four.

The town crouched on the southern side of a tidal inlet. At low water scores of small boats on legs tilted in the mud and when the tide was full sedately floated as if by miracle. The net store in which Kelso hid was at the top of a tall, rough-stone house that seemed to lean out over the water. A projecting timber beam with block and tackle allowed nets to be transferred from the loft directly into any boat below. Across the inlet and at its seaward point a lighthouse could at times be dimly glimpsed when the fog thinned. From close beside the lighthouse a horn moaned hideously into the murk that blanketed the coast.

Once, a team of armed police in an open truck parked at the end of the building and searched its lower floors. Coarse voices rumbled below and polished black boots crashed. But they did not make their way to the loft, though one of these soldiers thrust a head and torso through the trapdoor and cursed. Perhaps it was lunchtime.

In the middle of the afternoon a crocodile of splendid schoolgirls made its way across the little square that lay between the store and the remainder of the settlement. They wore black shoes and white kneesocks, and their immaculately laundered blouses were decorously open at every provocative throat. The procession was escorted fore and aft by watchful and resentful teachers; but the girls, perhaps by way of revenge for insults yet to come, tossed their magnificent manes and threw their shoulders back and flashed their strong teeth, looking about them in all directions with proud challenge. Sullen bystanders spat in the gutter; a crone in a garret

window screamed abuse and hurled refuse from a pot. The girls, looking more magnificent than ever, marched onwards.

By nightfall the bar diagonally across the square was bright and busy. A party of policemen relaxed at tables under awnings with jugs of wine and platters of shellfish and rough bread. But still Kelso waited. Only when the bar had closed and its patrons had dispersed into the night did his visitor come. It was the elderly man who had taken him off by boat from the beach of good hope at the wrecked tunnyman. At first light he had seen the door of the cottage jammed wide and recognised the small signal of alarm.

‘When do we start?’

‘We must go now. It will be a difficult trip. The tides are wrong. It should have been four days yet, and then in one of the big motor boats. But if you stay one more night, they will catch you’.

They made their way to the ground floor of the building and then by way of a damp, circular staircase into some sort of tidal basement. A porch looked onto the tidal mud; at full tide, the basement would be flooded. The fog was very thick, and the unseen horn howled. But the sound was wildly distorted; it might have come from miles inland. Or perhaps it was another horn they could hear, from further down the coast. They skirted the banks of mud, holding close to the high wall that kept the town from slipping down into its sea. But at a rubble-stone jetty they found water, and a boat waiting for them. She was a primitive half-decked craft, black painted, with a tiny standing-lug mizzen and a very large dipping-lug main of tanned flax; or so the captain said.

And he added with his queer Breton pride, ‘She is very fast, the fastest boat in the port’.

Acutely conscious of these old honours, Kelso said, 'She is a very beautiful boat'.

The boatman received this tribute - its truth so self evident - without comment. Perhaps his little ship was accustomed to it.

Instead he said again, 'We had planned for next week, when the tides are slacker. But the weather will be good, at least'.

Thwarts held her lapstrake sides apart. Two sets of sweeps and thole-pins to match were evidence that if the wind died, they would row. There was no engine. They cast off in complete silence, and the Breton worked a single oar over the stern until the little vessel had glided over to the far side of the inlet. The fog was still dense and they felt their way down the north shore until the mouth of the inlet. Directly above them a light suddenly stabbed into the night; and then the horn howled.

The Breton said, 'Now we wait for the tide to turn, and it will take us up the channel'.

The old man held his little boat off the rocks with an oar and stared intently into the water. He offered a jug of brandy and they sipped at it in turn. Patches of foam began to move along the rocks; there was suddenly some tiny motion in the water that had not been there moments earlier.

'Now she runs', the Breton said.

He produced a tiny compass, and placed it with much care on the floor of the boat. With two oars mounted on their pins, he at once began to pull strongly out into the channel and the rocks of the harbour-mouth disappeared almost at once. The Breton rowed strongly for twenty minutes and then paused to peer at the compass. Very close at hand the tide could be heard pouring over rocks. Almost at once a stone beacon loomed overhead with broken water

rushing past its base; and the Breton grunted with some sort of satisfaction. As soon as they were down-tide of the beacon he spun the boat head-to and hoisted the mizzen which held her stem to the gentle breeze that they had found almost as soon as they had cleared the harbour.

‘The fog won’t last, we had better hurry’, the old man said. ‘But perhaps it will rain later. If it does, it will bring a lot of wind’.

He made rain and wind sound like a very great advantage. He sheeted the mizzen hard, tacked the mainsail to an offset eye in the gunwale right forward, took the halyard hook to the aftermost eye on the yard and hoisted the sail. Instantly the boat came alive and heeled a fraction till the Breton bore her off on a new course into the gloom, one hand on the tiller and the other cradling the little compass with compassion.

‘We will go with the tide right up the channel’, he said. ‘By the time we are at the end of it, day will have broken. There is an island. Then we will stay close to the shore until the afternoon. After that we will make our run’.

Even as he spoke there was some thinning of the fog, or perhaps the first strokes of dawn; quite far off to the right a conical buoy could be seen, tilting furiously in the stream. Almost at once two more stone beacons straddled the course, and the Breton altered his heading a little and surged the sheets. The little boat gathered pace; and then they burst through the wall of fog into early daylight.

Away to the right could be seen a thin line of land topped with water towers, two lighthouses and a semaphore station; much closer to the left, and bulkier, was the island under whose lee they planned to lie. Colonies of seabirds floated on the smooth water, waiting for

the fierce tide to slacken. Out to sea, an immense dark wall of more fog could be seen. Without warning a destroyer cruised slowly from this fog and then rushed off to the west, the national ensign on her stern.

‘See Oussent and die’, the old Breton growled.

‘Why?’

It was a superstition, he said, the sort that was never wrong. But he did not elaborate, perhaps for fear that it might taint the curse. The island was dotted with harsh little stone houses and walled allotments. On beaches and in rocky coves small boats were drawn up towards the high-water mark, awaiting the liberation of the tide. Heeling a little to the breeze, their boat skimmed inside a line of beacons and across banks of weed-covered rock lying close below the surface; long lines of yellow foam showed where the tidal currents marched.

‘Here we stay, and it is time to eat’, the Breton said.

He swung his boat head-to and grabbed a cork buoy with a short, black-handled boathook. The mainsail crashed lazily about overhead. In a few moments, the boat lay anchored to the buoy and the mainsail was lowered into a rough tent over its yard. The little mizzen was dropped too, for she would lie tide-ride in that weight of stream. He had brought bread and cheese and sausage and some very rough wine; as the grey and diffident day rose, they dined in the shelter of the sail and then Kelso slept.

When he woke a pale sun was somewhere to the west and the boat was much closer to the land. The Breton was aft, hauling lobster pots and tossing the catch into a small vivier tank in the heart of the vessel. The dense fog that had lain out to sea in the morning had moved closer; now it looked very thick. A breeze, fresher than

earlier, had made from the west. They ate the rest of the bread and cheese, and some smoky sausage, and each took a long draught of brandy from the jug.

‘Now it is time to go’, the Breton said. ‘With this wind we should be over by dawn. The only danger is the patrol boats. But with the fog and the darkness we should have luck. It will be very bad for us if we do not’.

They set sail and skimmed north. Once clear of the lee of the island a lift in the water began to roll easily in from the west. Without the shelter made from the sail, it was much colder. Late sunlight bathed their passage; and then they plunged into a bank of dark, thick fog. The Breton adjusted his sails and the boat moved a little more slowly; but now she sailed herself, though they watched the compass carefully for fear of a wind change and an undetected course alteration.

Slowly, night appeared to fall. It was hard to be sure. And in the fog, it was hardly possible to estimate distance of sound either. But somewhere beyond the limit of vision big propellers were thrashing, as freighters trundled along the south-bound and north-bound lanes. Sometimes, the high moan of their horns could be heard. Once, in a thin patch, the Breton raised an arm: very high above them, and obviously very close, were the masts and derricks of a large ship, rushing westwards. But of her propellor, or horn, they heard nothing at all: although her wash rolled up almost at once and set the little lugger rocking violently.

Then, clear of the shipping lanes, they found the open sea. The wind freshened and swung ahead; they dropped the mainsail and reefed it, and then rehoisted. It was fresh now, the breeze, and the waves were getting larger; but the Breton was unconcerned. It

would not last, he said: and sure enough, after an hour the wind returned to its original quarter and lessened in strength. Without warning they sailed out of the fog; stars glittered across the sky and a lazy moon was low in the east. An engine was beating somewhere back in the fog, but the Breton said it was a motor trawler and would not cause problems.

Kelso asked about the party of schoolgirls assaulted the previous afternoon. The captain said they were the daughters of the rich, some even the daughters of collaborators: they were lucky that they were free to parade their shamelessness in the town. This freedom was a testament to popular restraint. But the people would not put up with their provocations forever. Sooner or later, these putaines would pay for the sins of their parents! The captain spat far out over the gunwale, and turned his attentions to the trim of the sails.

The little boat rushed on. Capfuls of spray from time to time burst over her weather rail and when enough water had accumulated in the tarred bilge Kelso bailed with a tin pannikin secured to a thwart with a length of hard twine. The Breton watched the compass carefully and hand-rolled cigarettes from a packet of the finest American tobacco.

Kelso asked if his captain knew the coast of England well, or was this, perhaps, his first visit?

The Breton laughed. During the war, he said. After the capitulation. He had deserted after the capitulation and served with the Royal Navy. So he knew the coast of England well. And then they had sent him home to co-ordinate clandestine work on his own coast. This was how he had come to work for the Scottish colonel called Jack. Again they sailed into a bank of fog. In time however, it

began to grow a fraction less dark. Or perhaps the fog had again thinned. It was impossible to say. The Breton watched the surface of the sea with extreme care.

‘There is an important headland’, he said. ‘Off this point is a tidal race. We must keep to the east of the race. If the tide is running against the wind - it will be very dangerous in there’.

They altered course slightly to the eastward, and the Breton strained to listen into what was left of the night. After a while, he said he could hear the race in the distance: but Kelso could hear nothing of it, though once a foghorn howled from somewhere ahead. The Breton smiled in his grim seaman’s way, and they shared what was left of the brandy. And then they sailed out of the fog and into the last hour of a fine starlit night: and prepared to celebrate a safe landfall on, and uninterrupted passage to, the coast of England.

Ten minutes later they saw the grey outline of the gunboat, and then heard the snarl of its engines as it leapt off eastwards trailing a storm of foam and broken water astern. The engines faded, and then turned south and west and strengthened again as they drew closer.

The Breton said, ‘He was not showing lights of any sort. That means he is on patrol for people like us. Perhaps he has been waiting for us and is now beginning his search. Let us hope that the wind does not die now’.

Land began to be sensed rather than seen in the west and they altered course to close with it. The gunboat’s engines could be heard roaring in the murk astern; and then silence. The Breton smiled but said nothing. To the east of them were the faint outlines of anchored naval vessels. A squadron of cruisers and destroyers, the Breton said. Everyone knew they were there in case any of the

Royal Navy ships from their base up the coast developed ideas independent of what passed for the government these days.

He added, 'But they have no fuel for their ships, the enemy makes sure of that. And no ammunition either. And all the officers are in special camps. So how could they fight?'

They heard the bell-buoy before they saw it: the lazy clang-clang of the can as it shifted with the tide and the last of the swell finding its way round the point.

The Breton said, 'This is the Manacles. We must go inside. There are many rocks'.

They altered course to take them inside the clang of the buoy. All round, broken water showed where shoals of rocks lurked. Then they were free to break away from the coast again. Kelso lay concealed under the half-deck forward as they sailed down the shore, past a bluff point and into the arms of an estuary. A town in the last of the night sprawled on a Cornish hillside. Fishing vessels were putting out to sea; an old square-rigger was anchored in the fairway and a harsh voice could be heard urging men to be about their work. Then the river, its banks thickly treelined, narrowed, and they ran swiftly along its length, in the very first of the morning. The Breton said Kelso should get ready to disembark very quickly indeed. They would be at the landing place at Coombe very soon now.

'What if they catch you here?', Kelso wondered.

'I was lost in the fog', the Breton said easily. 'It is not so uncommon. And the wind was fair. Other boats will be over today too. We can sell the lobsters at the top of the river for a far better price. And if the weather is fair we can be home tomorrow'.

A modest concrete slip appeared at a bend in the river.

'Here', the Breton said. 'Go straight up the path and you will find a bar. That is where they will come to meet you. Bonne chance!'.

He dropped the mainsail in a rush and the boat slowed to a near stop before she ran her stem onto the concrete pier. Kelso leapt ashore the Breton poled-off his ship at once with an oar, rehoisted the sail, waved an arm, and once more was swiftly moving up-river.

The morning was marvellously peaceful. The sun was just about to rise in a strikingly blue sky and birds were singing on every hand. Even after such a short time at sea, the colours of the land seemed much brighter than usual.

Kelso plunged into the trees that swallowed the track and walked for a hundred yards. Then a clearing, where a tarmac road began. Beside it was a bar of the sort that catered for tourists in the summer season. Timber tables were stacked at one gable: a sign, in need of repainting, advertised teas and ices. In the distance a siren howled. Perhaps it was a ship preparing for sea. There was nothing to do now but wait. At least he had arrived: and that was the start of the business completed.