

Six.

The town curved with the shoreline, its back under a hill that gave shelter from the prevailing wind. To one side of the settlement developers had built some acres of speculative bungalows, which were decorated with net curtains, trim chimneys and the sort of prim windows that never looked into each other's business and seldom paid any attention to any business but their own. Each little household - no smoke was ever seen to make its way forth from the prim chimneys - was fronted by a garden of small flowers and ornamental walls of white-painted stone. A gravel path led to an iron gate, always black, and thence to the portals of the residence.

A little further into town the buildings grew to two and three storeys: an older sort of architecture of strong sash windows and grey stone that managed neither to encourage or dissuade the attention of an observer. In all, they were buildings of a curious indifference to everything, or nearly everything, that passed them by. Here was a modest shopfront, for bicycles or meats or bakers' wares; there a modest public house which seemed never to do business, except perhaps on a Saturday night, and then to a modest sort of drinker who did not fight with his friends, or curse shadows that passed as he made his lawful way homeward, quietly awash with beer and spirits.

Then came the dead centre of the town; its industrial, commercial and intellectual heart, as it were. Here was the mission to seamen, the post office, the general grocer, the customs-hut, the police station, a church which looked as if it had been gutted by fire; and the town's rough public house, in and around of which there was splendid scrapping when the fleet was in and there were still

wages to be invested. Then the harbour: giant stones making arms that strode out into the bay, a red or green light on the end of each, and inside the harbour wooden piers against which the fleet lay at rest when the tide was low.

Beyond this centre-ville, and somewhat on the edge of a hill, was to be observed a single stone house, two floors in height, with an all-glass summer-house at one end, to catch the light, and which looked impassively down towards the sins and virtues of the settlement below. It was here that Kelso Lamont found refuge on his arrival from Brittany, on the final stage of his journey to the north.

The lady whose house it was had collected him from the tearoom beyond the little pier on which he had landed shortly after dawn. She had roared up to the place in a maroon Jowett Javelin, boldly urged him into the boot, and directly rushed off again, to buy fresh-landed French lobsters in the town at the head of the river. Then it was westward down the coast for some miles, where Kelso was hurried into the loft of her building with warm promises that he would be called just as soon as she was sure that the coast (so to speak) was clear. And in time she had done just that: but with the caution that he was to remain in the house at all times other than during the night, when it was thought safe for him to stroll a little on the hill, follow the rocky coast a little to the west, as far as the mighty lighthouse there, stabbing blindly out into the Western Approaches.

The lady into whose care he had fallen was an artist. That is to say, she was a painter of likenesses of things - rather than the things themselves - which likenesses she rendered mainly on canvas. She contrived to make a living from the sale in summer of those canvasses which she painted in the winter. She had strict views on the prosecution of her trade too, expressed in noisy rages

when things went less than well. 'Fat on lean!' she would cry in dangerous tones, when a small portrait of - say - a harbour scene, the sense of perspective strangely tilted, was going badly.

There were scores of these paintings scattered on walls throughout the building, and many more were stacked in temporary frames in the airy summer-house; and if they did not show the harbour in one or other of its moods, then they showed a few fish half-wrapped in newspaper, or the lighthouse above and beyond the building, or simply the view from the summer-house itself. Yet others contrived to leave an impression of nothing but light: and when she showed these to her guest, she volunteered, as if the explanation were of some importance, 'Thick paint in the light, and thin paint in the dark'.

And then she would always say, in that challenging and disbelieving tone that painters use, 'Don't you know anything about light at all?'

Humbly enough, her guest would say that he did not, though she did not believe this; no painter ever believes that anyone, not even a non-practitioner, can be quite as stupid, as blind, as that!

And then Kelso, idling through one of the stacks of temporarily framed canvasses, found a painting that was quite out of the run of things; quite clearly representational, of respectable perspective, a humdrum scene of the little square down in the town, by the post office and the seaman's mission and the police station. In the centre of the square a figure was hanging from a gibbet, somewhat off centre as if to suggest that a stiff breeze had been blowing when the view was, so to speak, executed. The figure, which appeared to be naked, also appeared to be wearing a dunce's cap. Kelso asked her what this painting showed.

It took two days of prevarication on her part; but one evening they found themselves in the summer-house as it was getting dark, and in the company of a bottle of naval-issue vodka. On the label, two splendidly-thighed girls in red kerchiefs marched boldly from an ocean of rippling corn with sickles brandished high aloft.

She said, 'You know what the sailors say about these two?'

But Kelso pressed her to explain the painting; and when she had half-filled a pair of generous tumblers with neat vodka, she began to tell him what had happened.

'This part of the world has always drawn outsiders', she said. 'For one thing, painters have always been attracted to the light. There has been a community of us, or at least a collection, here for a long time. But it draws others too. There is an old construction camp up on the moor, not so far back from the lighthouse. At least there was'.

It didn't amount to much, she said, not much really, two or three corrugated huts that the labourers and masons had used when they were rebuilding the light some years back.

'Anyway, the place attracted religious elements from the cities after the invasion. They had always come down here, and this new lot weren't much different. They lived up there in the huts, kept themselves to themselves mainly, and we never saw much of them in the village'.

She slugged at her vodka as if it were water. In the growing dark, the kerchiefed lasses could still just be seen, striding from their hiding-place among the rippling corn.

'But there were rumours', she went on after a contemplative savour of her vodka. 'Of course, there were bound to be in a place like this. They were educated for a start, all of them, and that is

always suspicious in a small place. Engineers, physicists and what not, all men at first. And then they brought in some women, so of course the locals started to call it the Commune. Maybe it was too. There was plenty of sniggering after that, as you can imagine. But in no time they had a wind turbine built, had glasshouses for plants, had done the old huts up, and they were in business. Once or twice, some of them came down to the church services in the village, but that soon stopped. Very friendly with the clergyman, they were, but the locals weren't keen. They weren't welcome, basically, outsiders never really are in a place like this. I suppose they were some sort of competition. Quite a lot of effort went into making sure that none of the young locals got mixed up with them, and nobody let the facts of the matter get in the way. For a while there was a rumour that they were pagans, and worshipped the sea - just the sort of rubbish you would expect from city folk who know damn all about the sea. But then they put up a fairly big cross and that put an end to the talk about pagans. It was all something to do with the seventeenth century, people started to say. Self-sufficiency, I suppose. They even gave their little commune a name. They called it Daniel, though nobody in the village called it that of course. Down here it was just called the Commune, though the younger ones called it Camp Sex. But whatever it was called, the people who stayed there became known as the Daniels'.

Kelso asked, ever so mildly, 'Were they some sort of anarchists or something like that?'

She did not know. There were any number of sects like them. Mumblers, Fifth Monarchists, New Diggers and lots more. It had all started not long after the invasion.

‘But this lot were happy to be called Daniels. They always seemed respectable enough to me, and it didn’t take long for people to lose interest in the place. In fact, we more or less forgot about it. And then we heard that a couple of fairly senior people had come down from county headquarters with questions for the local policeman. We’ve just got two of them in the village. One of these visitors wasn’t much more than a country copper, but the other one - the local boys didn’t like him at all. A foreigner, they reckoned, down all the way from London. Of course, anyone from the city is a foreigner here. Anyway, this foreigner wanted information about the Daniels, though it was quite obvious he knew a lot more about them than the local boys did. Some people said he was from the secret religious police’.

Kelso said he hadn’t heard that they had set up a religious police; but it made sense, all things considered. His hostess scoffed that he must have been out of the country for too long. Everyone knew that something like that had been established not terribly long after the invasion. First, there had been the government registration of clergymen and then their examination by the secular state authorities. It had all been quite lawful. Parliament had made it quite clear that there would be sanctions if the church authorities chose not to co-operate - so of course they did co-operate. The established clergy had nothing to hide, did it? And anyway state examination of clergy wasn’t such an objectionable idea, it had a perfectly respectable and very long history. Nearly everyone passed, and quite civilised provision was made for those who did not. Or most of them anyway. Of course, there were some who chose not to conform - so they could not be registered. And therefore not licensed by the state to pursue their old calling: with

very serious penalties if they were caught so doing. None of this had been secret, there had been announcements about it in the newspapers quite a number of times, with extensions to the deadline and even an amnesty for those who had been late.

After all, parliament hadn't really done much more than reinstate the powers of religious investigation that had been claimed by the first Protectorate! Or the Tudors, come to think of it.

It had been different in Scotland, of course. There was a long record there of opposition in principle to bishops, especially when appointed by the state. That was what had sparked the Bishop Riots when they burned down the cathedral in Edinburgh, just to spite themselves.

'Typical of you Scots, really', she said breezily .

'And then one morning', she went on, 'we found the village awash with Paramilitary units and prison vans. During the night there had been an assault on the Daniels, and thirty of them had been arrested. The authorities were pretty rough about things, I must say, and had dogs. Women and children were dragged down the hill around breakfast time. There was a dreadful amount of screaming, as you would expect. Then they took the men down, all chained together. It looked very much as if they had been beaten rather badly. But perhaps they had resisted arrest, of course'.

So that was the end of the Daniels. By lunchtime they had gone, and by that evening they might never have existed in the place.

But there had been a twist to the story a week or so later. One morning the local clergyman was arrested. In broad daylight, the village policemen had gone to his house and simply asked him to come back to the station with them. Obviously, he had. The whole

village watched this performance with some disbelief. Even more, when the clergyman was taken away that afternoon, and the church quite openly was set on fire by the truckload of Paramilitaries who had come down that morning from Exeter.

Where he had been taken, nobody knew; but a few days later the rumour began to circulate that he had been tried in some court, found guilty and sentenced to death. The following morning religious police - this time they were quite open about their identity - erected a gibbet in the square, and drove an open-backed truck around the village. With megaphones, they urged people to attend the hanging. Any person who did not wish to attend was required to register with the authorities as a religious dissenter - so pretty much the whole place had turned out.

Everyone had waited for an hour or so, and then they brought the padre out. By now he was in a terrible shape, they must have treated him dreadfully. He was naked and had been shaved all over, and he had looked very peculiar indeed, with his little moustache gone and his dunce's cap. And they had done something dreadful to his legs - they looked as if they had been utterly smashed to some sort of pulp. People had said it was wedges, an old form of religious persuasion. But at that time, of course, nobody was too sure what the wedges punishment was all about.

And then they had hanged the poor man, right there in the middle of the village, before a sullen but terrified crowd. That was when people had realised the new Protectorate really meant business with religion.

She said, 'That's him there. They left him swinging for days, so I painted him. I don't know why. Perhaps it is some way of remembering the poor man'.

'And the Daniels?', Kelso asked after a time, in which he had seemed lost in thought.

'I don't know about the women and children, I suppose they were sent to one of the camps up in the north. But the men were pressed'.

'Pressed?'

'A truckload of flat stones. The last stone does it. Of course, this was in the early days when the religious police ran away with themselves. Parliament made pressing strictly illegal not long afterwards. Said it was all a mistake. That was when they introduced branding and boring for heresy. And amputation. Usually tongues and ears unless it is a very serious offence. I mean, there was nothing new in any of it. This is what we used to do. And at least this time it was all done under medical supervision'.

'Why were they pressed?', Kelso wondered.

'Heresy mainly', she said grimly. 'They had not registered as unorthodox believers, either, which was an offence in itself. A very serious one. And of course the established churches were quick to denounce them'.

And what had the heresy been, Kelso wondered.

'They were expecting something to happen', she said. 'Something was coming, or someone, some people said a Second Coming. But we never heard for certain. Others reckoned it was to be an American invasion. That could be a Second Coming, couldn't it? I mean, none of this was secret, they even put the sentences in

the newspapers. But they just said herecy, they didn't say what kind it was'.

'A coming of some sort'.

'A coming', she said, taking her portrait of the hanged clergyman and holding it to the light for a moment. For that moment too, you could see what she meant by fat on lean, thick in the light and thin in the dark. Or was it the other way round?

'They said the padre was a secret Daniel', she said, 'though I never met the poor man, far less spoke to him'.

Around the swinging, naked, hairless body in its dunce's cap, she had used the paint very thickly indeed.