

Eight.

Kelso sat below the lighthouse on its curve of hill and watch the small ships move sedately in the distance. Much closer, fast patrol boats of the naval security cordon raced back and forth, bold ensigns streaming from their sterns. Over the western Channel the sun flitted between slabs of grimy cloud.

He stood up and walked back from the edge of the sea into the dense undergrowth that flourished on the harsh hillside. Soon, he came to the site that the Daniels had chosen for their ill-fated commune. The wind-turbine still stood: it had been very well engineered, but the generator shed at its base had been smashed and looted. The curved, corrugated sheds had been looted too, though it was not obvious whether that had been at the hands of the security forces or vengeful local vandals. Small communities, after all, were ever mindful of communal proprieties: and the strict requirement to enforce them at any cost. Even retrospectively.

The accommodation huts couldn't have held more than fifty souls at most. They contained little but the remains of steel-framed beds - all single beds - and very simple bedside cabinets in painted, pressed steel. The mattresses appeared to have been dragged to the centre of the settlement and burned: perhaps the looters had even made a ceremony of it, on account of their symbolic infamy. A timber cross had been toppled with an axe; on the pillar, naturally in vertical format, someone had carefully carved the slogan - Mene Mene Tekil Parsin. Only one hut had been left unharmed. Perhaps it was the Daniels' communal hut, for administration and recreation and the communal celebration of general virtues. It had contained cooking facilities - the food had been looted and scattered - and a

library of religious books. These had not been looted. The history of sects in the period of the first Protectorate figured prominently: Diggers, Levellers, Ranters, Fifth World Monarchists and others. There were some tracts on the Lollards, or Mumblers, as their enemies had known them, a handful of biographies of Newton and some monographs on his work on the numerology of Daniel. There were obscure titles in French and Italian on the Jansenists and Patarenes, others on the Commonwealth of the just and the saved, and a copy in German of the Malleus, the hammer of witches and heretics: but it was not a first edition. Someone had carefully annotated the passages relating to the showing of the instruments. There was also a number of wartime publications, in various languages, on the organisation of sabotage networks. It seemed extraordinary that the security police had not taken them away: but perhaps the officers had been unable to read them. Or had they been left as a provocation for any local keen to combine tastes for heresy and explosives?

Kelso stood for a time, watching the route back to the village: and when he was satisfied that it was clear, he made his way back to the stern household of his keeper. She had been sketching some preliminary piece of work, but complained about the light and carefully put the work away as if in some strange way she did not want him to see it. Her manner had changed in the course of the day. While he had been at the lighthouse and the ruins of the commune, she had been in the village. She told him this on his return.

And then she added, 'You will be leaving soon. There are some things you will need to know first'.

She produced a bottle of vodka, once again Soviet naval issue. She seemed to have an endless supply of vodka. There was a hot trade in the ports up the coast, she said: and they sat in her summer-house, stacked with its finished and uncompleted paintings, and prepared to drink it.

‘Attack it with passion’, she urged, ‘there is plenty more to come’.

For each of them she poured a four-finger tumbler, and left the bottle opened. This time the crudely-printed label portrayed a bearded sailor, pistol raised in one hand. On the harbour below, a fleet of small boats was converging. Each had a sentry-box shelter forward, and a tanned steadying sail over the transom. Men in bright yellow smocks stood motionless on deck as the harbour walls engulfed them. Out to sea the sky had gone dark. Perhaps there was a storm on the way.

‘What do they fish for?’, he asked.

She said that the small boats hand-lined for mackerel. ‘The bigger boats are trawlers, mainly, but they will be in later today. There is some sort of a gale on the way’.

She squinted at the rushing cloud with a proprietorial air, as if it were interfering with the quality of her light. But she was watching a small aircraft moving down the coast at low altitude. It banked and circled the bay, before heading out to sea. Quite soon, it was lost in the clouds that were bundling up from the westward.

She told Kelso then about the Protectorate’s security apparatus. How the police had been left pretty much alone; except at the very senior level, of course. What was left of the old army was now known as the Regulars. The air-force no longer existed, and the navy had no more than a handful of ships, all without fuel

or ammunition or officers. There were around 150, 000 troopers in the Militia - which was a sort of internal security corps. Quite a lot of the troopers were long-term criminals, released on licence. This encouraged their loyalty to the system. The Militia could also call on its own heavily-armoured motorised units, which were kept in barracks most of the time. The Paramilitaries were much bigger than the Militia, but not so trusted. The part-time Auxiliaries backed them up. The Specials were a riot-police for urban areas. They had part-timers too. There was some talk of a riot-police for the countryside too, which was to be called the Yeomanry. But they hadn't set it up yet. At least not on a national scale. Nobody really had any accurate idea of the cumulative size of these agencies. Of course, it was a very serious offence to attempt to calculate this figure, or even discuss it in public or private.

And then there was the religious police. Its officers had been pretty savage at first but now they operated under the shield of the regular police and the law.

She said, 'They don't use uniforms much, but you can tell them at once when they do. Plain grey, just like the old Church Army, before it was disbanded. People still disappear, of course. But for the most part they are processed through the courts like any other criminal. I mean, all these offences are recognised in law, and the penalties are specified in law. And in special cases of national security, the Militia have their own summary courts which can operate under cover of martial law. The Home Secretary can designate a county by simple decree and martial law comes into effect at once for a period of three months - retrospectively, if he wishes. The decree can be renewed, but it usually doesn't have to be'.

‘What happened in Scotland?’, Kelso asked quietly.

‘Hah!’, she snorted, as if scenting the prospect of revenge for some unstated ill. ‘The government announced that there were going to be bishops there too. All hell broke loose. There was rioting for days, burning of churches, looting of museums, till they hanged a few of their presbyterian divines at Edinburgh cross. That calmed things down a good bit’.

‘And the bishops stayed?’

‘Oh no, they were taken out of the country for their own safety. There was talk last summer of an archbishop being appointed, who would tell the Scots presbyterians what to do. I saw it in the Telegraph. But we haven’t heard any more about that recently’.

Rather more than half the bottle of vodka had already gone. It was getting dark quickly. Biliou clouds were massing, and angry gusts of wind were surging at the walls of the summer-house.

He asked, ‘Do I go tonight?’

She said, ‘Yes, tonight’.

‘I would like to take a walk down to the harbour’.

‘If you think it is safe’, she said.

To seaward from the harbour it was already dark, at least in the eastern half of the sky. On the head of one seawall, a beacon was flashing white: beyond it, the red and green lights of larger boats were swinging home. Along the length of the quay the smaller boats were finishing the discharge of their catches. Slashed in black and gold and green, mackerel were piled in boxes while seabirds squalled above them.

Then larger boats began to arrive and tie-up alongside the quay. They were longliners and gillnet vessels which had been working the deep water out to the west, some even up towards

Lundy, which had been driven into shelter by the prospect of worsening weather. Each of the men looked deeply tired, as if he had not slept for days. Derricks were rigged, and boxes of fish were slung ashore from the holds, the blocks at the derrick-heads squealing in delight and pain. Some of the boats were landing monks, others long-lined ling and silver hake.

Kelso asked with sudden alarm, 'I amn't going by boat, am I?'

The wind was stronger by the minute now. Electric lamps strung the length of the quay were swaying ominously, casting odd shadows. They walked the length of the pier and retraced their windy steps. At the root of the cobbled wall, a saloon car had been parked.

'By car', she said, 'at least to start with'.

She took half a dozen mackerel from a box, stuffed them in a pocket, and they made their way back to the house.

'To eat?'

'To paint, you fool'.

But in the event they ate the fish. Perhaps she would try to paint them from memory, she said.

'It isn't so difficult as eating from memory'.

She made it sound as if she had done that sometime in the past, but did not elaborate.

'You will need to be very careful', she said, 'you made a fool of two of them in Brittany'.

Kelso said nothing. What was there to say anyway?

She marched on. 'They were the wrong people to mix with. Soviet security people, attached to their embassy in Paris. They must have known you were coming'.

Kelso said, weakly, 'They were looking for me. I think they would have killed me if they had found me'.

'Well', she said, 'you certainly let them know that you were there. Or had been there. And they suspect that someone was taken over by one of the crabbers. The boat was scuttled in the estuary. But when they went to recover, she had gone. So they know almost with certainty that someone has come over'.

Kelso wondered where she got the information from, how she kept in touch with the colonel's network. Someone in the village, one of her fishermen friends, perhaps?

'Where were you in Spain?'

Kelso said, 'The northern front'.

'And you went back there afterwards?'

'They thought I had been killed', Kelso said lamely, 'it seemed a good idea'.

She changed tack. 'What did you do after Spain?'

'University for a bit', he said humbly.

'What?', she demanded.

'Ottoman languages mostly', he said, more humbly than ever.

She laughed nastily. 'That won't be much use to you here, will it! Again that tone of triumphalist vengeance.'

'And after university, you were in Germany?'

'In Istanbul', Kelso said. 'And then Germany. Mainly Cologne'.

She digested this intelligence in silence, and changed the subject without warning.

'We have identity papers for you', she said. 'I hope they are good. And a route along with maps to get you to where you are going. And spare fuel in cans. Let's finish the vodka. Then you

better get down to the car. There are security gates you need to get through before dawn. Otherwise you are in very serious trouble'.

So they finished the vodka in the darkening summer-house, and she gave him his papers and a litre of sailors' vodka: again, two flaxen maidens marched from their hiding-place in a gracious field of flowing corn. Then she led him to the door and bade him farewell. As he walked to the harbour, he heard a telephone ring from deep within the house. After three angry and insistent rings, it abruptly stopped.

At the harbour the wharves were empty, though the lamps still swung wildly and threw gaunt shadows over the moored boats at the side of the quay. The tide was full and the boats were riding high to the cobbled wall and jerking spasmodically at their mooring lines. At the far side of the harbour waves were bursting on the sea wall, and hurling spray across the smooth waters of the haven within. At the far end of the harbour, there was the sound of revelry from a brightly-lit pub. As she had promised, there were cans of extra fuel with the car; she had said that fuel rationing would make it very difficult for him to find petrol en route.

No one saw him leave the little town beside its stormy harbour. Two men were fighting at the open entrance to the pub as he passed; then came the rows of trim and opaque houses with trim gardens and railings which never looked into each other's business; and then the open coast road tossed itself suddenly left, and low hills began.

He drove onwards, sustained by sips of the sailors' vodka, up over the hills by the intestinal roads that led by neat, anonymous villages to the north and east. Soon enough the sea was to be sensed in the darkness ahead, as he swung along the empty coast

road. By midnight he was driving through a silent town at the mouth of some inconspicuous river. Shortly afterwards he saw the convoy coming and pulled over at once. Two field-grey Militia armoured cars led the procession, with motor-cycle outriders. Then came a dozen anti-aircraft guns on low-loader transporters. The little convoy took ten minutes or so to pass; a goggled commander on one of the cars saluted in the lights, and they were gone.

The gale blew itself out early and the first signs of a false dawn came early too; the sharp outlines of trees and barns were to be seen and in the distance the outlines of sterner hills, somewhere over the border with Wales. Just before it grew quite bright he drew into a passing-place beside a farm-gate from which muddy cart-tracks led off to the brow of a low eminence lined with trees. The silence of the morning was astonishing.

Kelso refuelled the car and returned the empty cans to the boot. The smell of petrol on the morning was frightening. As he closed the boot, he saw in the growing light the tarpaulin-camp crouched in the corner of the field, a smokeless chimney tilted above it. And then he saw the tinker boy: ragged, barefoot, standing in silence in the trees beside the road. The boy looked directly at him with great intelligence, directly into him with an un-nerving degree of understanding. Then the boy smiled broadly, fully complicit in the morning's work, and in a flash had disappeared into the thick tree cover.

By nine that morning he had made his way safely past the great industrial cities to west and east, though the roads had been busy with military traffic: short convoys of troop transports, once a tank regiment, and on two occasions artillery units with the sort of close-range guns suited to urban battle. At every junction too, there

had been a police presence, with a radio van and Militia close-support vehicles, sometimes even a heavy machine-gun snout projecting from a small turret of sandbags.

And then, as he moved north, the traffic eased to a trickle; and when he saw a tearoom by the roadside, its parking space jammed with trucks, he swung off the main road and made his way to the door. He asked for coffee but the woman laughed and asked, where did he think he was? The tea wasn't fit to drink these days, but he could have as much as he liked, she said in her hospitable way. In the event, he had a very large mug of very brown tea. There was no food, the woman said, it wouldn't be in till later. If at all. She had hard, observant eyes: the sort that any policeman worthy of the name would have an arrangement with. That arrangement, Kelso supposed unkindly, was unlikely to be of a sexual nature. But of course one never knew, that was the great mystery, the great leveller, in such affairs.

The woman was watching him carefully. She asked if he was interested in tobacco. It took a moment before he realised what her game was.

'If you could help me', he said confidentially.

She slid a fifty tin of Capstan over the counter with imperceptible urgency. 'That'll be a fiver. Anything else I could do for you?'

Kelso sat at a table, relieved. No nark, but a perfectly common black-marketeer on a tiny scale. No doubt she would be gaoled if caught; and no doubt the country crawled with them.

A copy of that morning's Mirror lay beneath his table. It must have come up with an early driver from the south. Or maybe printed out of Manchester. There was scarcely a hint that anything had

changed at all. Perhaps, of course, nothing really had. Football reports occupied most of the back of the paper, along with racing and boxing. There was a gardening column and a page of strip-cartoons. The front page had a strong story of a rape and murder somewhere in the Midlands. A sad girl with dark hair looked out doubtfully at the reader. The police, the story said, were looking for some Regulars who had gone absent without leave from duty. The Home Secretary was quoted as saying that desertion of duty was a capital offence at a time of national danger. Page two had a political report. The leadership of the trades unions was calling for greater discipline in the workplace. It had petitioned the authorities to introduce martial law in industrial areas troubled with strikes and sabotage. The miners and the rail unions had not been present at the debate which had preceded the call. On Tyneside some sixteen-year olds had been sent to a detention centre for having listened to American radio stations broadcasting jazz from Dublin. They had pleaded not guilty, but had changed their minds when presented with the evidence of their parents, and had made a full confession to the court.

A party of truck drivers came in and sat at the adjacent table. Kelso carefully folded the Mirror, drained his mug of tea-dust, and returned to the car. By mid-morning, the peaks of the Lake District were striding to the west. Then Gretna, where a road-block was manned by half a dozen policemen. He stopped as instructed, but a young constable laughed and said that they were looking for four Regulars on the run who were believed to be heading north; and again he drove onwards.

Deep in the Border country he found the isolated inn that he sought: an ancient two-storey building with corbelled gables and

cautious windows that looked out suspiciously on the empty hills. To one end was a corrugated lean-to supporting a sign which appeared to advertise the services of a public bar: but the bar looked as if it had been closed for years. Above the central and principal doorway, a second sign said 'Inn', as if no further identification was merited. At the end of the building a track led to a shed clad in weathered clapboard; its double doors were held open by a pair of large boulder. Into this garage Kelso drove smartly, turned off the engine, and sat for some long minutes quite motionless. Then he rolled the retaining boulders aside, closed the two doors of the shed, and like any other passing traveller rapped confidently on the main door of the inn.

After a long delay a maid invited him enter and showed him to a drawing room decorated with sporting prints. The maid conjured from some hiding place a decanter of liquor, an antique tumbler of very heavy glass, and a swan-necked jug of water. The stopper of the decanter was missing, and someone had pressed to service a rough-carved plug of softwood in its place. In perfect silence the maid laid and lit a fire with tremendous speed and exemplary parsimony. Quite soon she had brought it to life and piled it with a careful amount of coal and split-logs. Then she withdrew, like a wraith. A dog barked furiously in the depths of the house. Then a radio was playing somewhere else in the house. A Schubert piano piece, one of those wrenchingly lovely melodies that summon all old loves in an indiscriminate rush of sentiment and regret. Then the dog barked furiously again. When it stopped, Schubert had gone.

Kelso poured himself a very large drink. It was whisky, real stuff, and the acrid vapours of peat blasted from the glass. It kicked in the gullet, too hard for that time of the day, and he added some

water. The liquor went pale, and the kick waited till it reached the stomach. Then it kicked just as hard. But as someone once had said; it's the ideas it gives you; and by the time that the maid announced dinner with a grandeur suggestive of the very greatest of dining-rooms, he had had many whiskies, and in consequence, many ideas.

Later, after an entire salmon, entirely on its own, in the freezing dining room, the maid escorted him to a bedroom. It was still early: perhaps she disapproved of the sort of person who was given to loitering by the fireside of an evening, as if it might lead to some sort of unspecified vice. But there was a bright fire in the bedroom, and a fresh decanter of whisky.

The maid said, 'The radio says a dangerous spy has come into the country from France. Perhaps even a drug smuggler. They say he is likely to head for Scotland.'

'Oh', Kelso said, every so politely.

The maid never once caught his eye, but turned the bed back smartly - surely it wasn't an invitation?

As she left, she said, 'You're from Edinburgh, aren't you? I can tell by the accent'.

'Not for many years'.

'Well, you'll be home for Christmas', she said. 'You will be taken there tomorrow. There is very heavy snow on the way. It would be best to sleep well. But there is a radio for you to listen to if you can't'.

The recent transport of wreckers from Leith had foundered in a North Sea gale and all had drowned. Four absentee Regulars suspected of rape in the Midlands had been arrested. And Leyton

Orient had beaten someone at football. Twice in a season, that made it.

But Kelso had never heard of the defeated team, and he was very tired. He turned off the radio, sensed some ravishing Schubert melody on the far frontiers of memory, and was asleep very quickly indeed.