Lemons for Shrove Tuesday

London, Autumn 1947.

Daniel heretics swarmed to the Embankment as the last weeks of summer rolled into early autumn. Already some outlaw cripples were begging at the junction of Parliament Street and the Stalingrad bridge. They dived barefoot into the traffic demanding alms and brandishing stump and crutch with insolent threat. One wild-eyed girl had lost her ears: to herecy, perhaps, in the early days of the second Protectorate.

Branded and amputee lookouts watched from the ruins of the Abbey and the corner of Westminster Hall, for people said religious-police squads still worked the city-centre during the hours of daylight.

Charlie Marr and his assistant watched these Daniels in silence from their armoured Daimler. For some moments the wild-eyed girl hammered on the windows and screamed silently at them. Then the Daimler jolted and the traffic began to move, and the Inspector returned to his newspapers. Fiona sat in silence, watching the city centre glide past the car's ever-so-thick and ever-so-deeply smoked windows.

The Mail had splashed with an exclusive on American espionage and sabotage networks financed by smuggled cocaine. The drug, described as deadly, was thought to be coming in through Scotland. But a crackdown - pitiless, of course - could be expected at any moment.

Charlie said, 'Who let these bastards print this?'

The Telegraph led on what the paper called a religious policy in full consonance with modern conditions. The campaign to outlaw the provocative ringing of church-bells was gathering pace. The matter of an archbishop for the Established Church north of the Border, in the company of The Thirty Nine Articles, the English Prayer Book and a consistory court of Star Chamber, had been temporarily shelved, pending further discussion with those of Scotland's presbyterian leaders who were prepared to discuss the matter in a responsible fashion. And rumour-mongering about the Messiah - except by registered organisations and within responsible limits - would henceforth be punishable by five years at hard labour, or ten for a second offence.

The Express gave most of its front page to the voluntary surrender of the fugitives associated with the Pollitt Plot, so lately hunted by the forces of the law. It was likely that Pollitt, Dutt and Rothstein would not be charged until early in the new year, when the full nature of their crimes, and the full extent of their accomplice network, would be better known. The distinguished barrister and liberal jurist Pritt had offered to represent their interests on a pro bono publico basis, in the event of such criminal proceedings. An editorial signed by Lord Beaverbrook called on the plotters to accept Pritt's kind offer, and also called on the remaining fugitives associated with the plot to give themselves up at once.

In Whitehall, opposite the old Banqueting Hall, the traffic stalled again, and it began to rain.

Charlie said, 'Isn't this where Charles I was beheaded?'

'Perhaps it is a bomb scare', the girl said.

For a time policemen in slicked capes dashed among the stalled cars and trucks. Partisan attacks had grown in frequency and

savagery in recent weeks. But there was no bomb. The traffic was waved forward. Charlie's driver cursed the false alarm with violent fluency. A police observation balloon was floating over Trafalgar Square. For a moment it disappeared in the low rain cloud, and then re-appeared again.

Fiona said, 'They have discovered how to make anti-tank guns'.

'Who?'

'The partisans'.

'You mean terrorists. And how anyway?'

'From truck-axles. They attacked Paramilitary stations last night in Lambeth and Southwark. Up from the sewers as usual'.

Charlie asked, 'How do you know?'

'One of the radio operators told me in the canteen', Fiona said, in cool tones. 'And they are going to re-open the Cohen-Petrovsky case'.

At the command bunker their driver parked the Daimler in an enclosure railed with coils of barbed-wire. Two Militia armoured cars, heroically strapped with shovels and crowbars and spare all-terrain wheels, were on duty. A unit of very tough penal-duty Paramilitaries guarded all the above-ground entrances.

Fiona said, 'How long do we have to stay for?'

'Tomorrow morning'.

Then they went down into the depths of the building. The bunker had four public underground levels. The lights seemed startlingly yellow after the dull, damp grey of the city skies. The girl's heels went click-click-click on the steel stairs and timber flooring; the pitch decreased as they went deeper into the bunker. Each electric bulb was protected by a steel grille, bolted into the bare brickwork.

In the auditorium the conference was almost ready to start. The Home Secretary was already present: though he was too busy a man to stay for long, of course. He wore an extremely expensive suit with an extremely white shirt below it. He seemed to be sweating very heavily indeed. Perhaps it was the heat.

Charlie asked quietly, 'Who's that with him?'

'That's Jack, an MP for some Edinburgh seat', Fiona said. 'A parliamentary adviser on narcotics'.

'Ex-military?', Charlie asked.

'He looks it', the assistant said, 'but I'll check'.

The Home Secretary was in discussion with Johnson, head of drugs intelligence for the Home Counties. Johnson was dressed for the golf course: perhaps he had managed a round or two in the morning. An elderly lady with a trolley offered tea and coffee to such as wanted it. On account of the important nature of the night's work, there was also white sugar from overseas, and fresh cream-milk straight in from the starving countryside.

Someone introduced the Home Secretary to Charlie as the senior liaison man between the drug-detection and national security agencies.

'Jolly nice to meet you', the Home Secretary said with warmth and sincerity. 'You're based in Victoria, aren't you?'

The Home Secretary ignored Fiona, and moved on to some other senior chaps. He was still sweating very heavily indeed.

One of the Assistant Chiefs took off his uniform jacket and hung it on the back of his chair. He carefully patted its pockets for fear, perhaps, that they had already been picked. He removed his cap with great care, smoothed his silver scalp and replaced the cap. Then he removed it again. Perhaps it was no more than a nervous

gesture. Or a masonic one. The end of his nose was very red; either from the heat of the auditorium, or a lifetime's drinking. Or perhaps it was no more than evidence of a hereditary disorder.

He wore half-moon spectacles, and sipped cautiously from a small glass of water. Without his cap and jacket, he might have been a sorrowing country solicitor forging a family will. And ensuring that all skeletons stayed firmly in the cupboards to which they had been allocated.

'Edinburgh first', the Assistant Chief said. 'That's in Scotland. Let's start with this cocaine business. We have an informant who runs some sort of night-club. MacGuffin's the name. One of us. Our chaps up there speak very highly of him. We expect to get a very big shipment tonight'.

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In the morning some people asked about washrooms, where they might soap away the grime and stress of the night. Others gathered at the foot of the ventilation shafts, and smoked black-market Capstan from fifty tins. Yet more found their way to the bunker's central canteen, and queued for service at a tin-tray counter. A blackboard offered pigeon pie and country potatoes. There were quote marks round the 'country', but it hardly mattered.

'Half-a-ton in Gorgie', Charlie said. 'Packed as granulated cane-sugar in American army ammunition cases. And two brothers from some island called Luing shot dead. Pity. Where is it anyway?'

'Luing?', the girl said.

'Gorgie', Charlie said.

‘Oh, that’s in Edinburgh’, the girl said, ‘but not one of the best parts’.

‘And the island?’

‘I’ll let you know’.

The canteen was already busy with intelligence, customs and police officers. The policemen kept strictly to themselves. A number of them had brought their own sugar, in careful packages. They shared this sugar amongst each other as if it were contraband. Or cocaine. In a corner, two uniformed sergeants were addressing imaginary golf-balls and sinking gigantic putts.

‘Where are they supposed to be from?’

‘Edinburgh, I think’.

Charlie and Fiona got coffee, and found in a corner a table of their own.

The girl said, ‘Two dead, one radio and half a ton. It has to be them.’

Charlie said, ‘We’ve missed them all the same’.

‘But we’re on the right track’.

Charlie said, ‘We know the Americans are running cocaine into Edinburgh. Now we’ve got half a ton of the stuff to prove it. But we don’t know why. We don’t know how. And we don’t know who to’.

Fiona said, ‘So what next?’

‘We wait for another move. Maybe they will try to replace their radio. They will certainly have to replace their people. If they try another run, of course’.

‘Will they?’

‘Who knows? And this coffee isn’t fit for pigs’.

Fiona said brightly, ‘People say there will be good coffee in the spring. And lemons in time for Shrove Tuesday’.

‘That’s rumour-mongering’, Charlie said. ‘You could get put away for that. Anyway, it’s Sunday. We don’t have to stay here all day’.

‘There are much bigger rumours than that going round’, the girl said with a laugh, as they returned to ground level and the Daimler.

The driver was smoking a Capstan: he had a round fifty tin on the dash, and a Sunday paper open at the sports pages. Leyton Orient had won a game. In tones of very considerable awe, the driver said that he had heard church bells ring earlier in the morning, somewhere to the north.

‘I had better report it, sir’.

‘Forget it’, Charlie said, ‘someone else will’.

They headed for the city centre. Across London police and Militia observation balloons could be seen clearly against the sky. In Oxford Street a platoon of clergy in full vestments and leathern thigh-boots was clearing sewers damaged in partisan attacks. An elderly man with a style of great distinction stood erect for a moment and watched the Daimler, and then bent again to his long-handled shovel.

Fiona said, ‘That’s a bishop’.

‘They’re volunteers’, Charlie said sourly. ‘Clergy are exempt from labour service on Sundays’.

‘Not in their own diocese’, Fiona said, with prim certitude.

They stopped in Trafalgar Square, beside the statue of George VI in his coronation robes. People said it was the last statue of the king in the country: but nobody could be sure, of course.

Charlie asked the girl if she wanted a run back to her own place. The driver could take her. But she said she could manage on her own. She would get a bus. Or the Tube if it was running. There weren't usually bomb attacks on a Sunday.

Fiona said, 'There is going to be a lot of snow this winter'.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'That's another rumour'.

Charlie said, 'I should hear everything but I hear nothing'.

Fiona said, 'I told you. Spend time in the canteen. YouÔll hear everything'.

'So, snow this winter.'

'And the Cohen-Petrovsky case is linked to the Pollitt Plot'.

'That's only speculation'.

'Right, but this one's definite. The Daniels are waiting for a comet. That's the big one just now'.

'Any comet yet?'

'No. But when it comes something is going to happen. Something is coming. Or someone'.

'How about an American invasion?'

'The Daniels say the Messiah is going to return'.

They sat for some moments looking out into the empty square.

'What are they doing with the cocaine?', Charlie said at length. 'Or planning to do with it?'

With a flash of inspiration Fiona said, 'For the king and his family. They will exchange the cocaine for their lives'.

'Forget it', Charlie said. 'They're all dead, all murdered in a basement somewhere in the early days'.

'That's only speculation', the girl said.

'Forget it', Charlie said. 'They're dead. All of them'.

Fiona got out of the car and Charlie rolled down one of the thick, smoked windows.

‘And when is the Messiah supposed to be coming back?’

‘Shrove Tuesday’, the girl said.

‘Roll on Shrove Tuesday’, Charlie said; and the big armoured Daimler powered down into Whitehall, and quite soon was lost to sight.