

PART THREE

Thirty-three.

By now the night was far gone. It would be dawn soon and the time available to them was getting short. A fire had been burning earlier in the night at Inverlair and they built it up again with logs. After the phone call it could not be long before the authorities returned to the lodge. And this time, it would be in very considerable force. Of that, there could be no doubt whatsoever.

By the light of the fire it was clear that the royals were in a terrible condition, barefoot, dirty, emaciated and in rags. They said they had hardly eaten since they had left their prison on Holy Isle: none seemed to know how long ago that had been now, though they thought it must have been days. The king was in the worst condition of them all. He had been repeatedly threatened with instant execution by his captors, which had taken a toll on his nerves, and he trembled intermittently at any raised voice. At times, his stutter rendered him almost incoherent. He wore leg shackles: and there seemed no way of removing them.

The building proved to be well stocked with provisions and stores, and Kelly searched the kitchens while Kelso hunted for transport to take them to their rendezvous. One of Maxine's young partisans looted the uniforms of the dead Milita, and the remainder broke into the armoury that they found at the back of the old shooting lodge. The clothes and boots, the children offered to the royals; the arms and explosives they kept for themselves.

They had also found a two-ton truck in Militia colours, but though it was garaged the engine would not start in the great cold. Maxine ordered that a fire be lit under the sump, so that the thick oil be warmed, while another of her partisans expertly stripped the fuel

and ignition systems by the light of an oil lamp. Then one of the children announced with absolute confidence that the engine would run; and it did, at once.

‘Where are you taking us?’, the king asked.

Kelly said, ‘To the coast. To an island called Shona’.

‘Why there?’, one of the daughters asked.

But already it was time to leave. Maxine took three of her partisans in the lorry. She ordered the remainder to cut the rail line, and attack the Militia who would come up on it. The others were to guard the road and rail bridges north of Inverlair. They were then to scatter back towards Rannoch and Corroul, where she would meet with them in three days. If she had not turned up by then, they were to assume that she would not be coming back, and would henceforth have to fend for themselves.

There was still two hours till daylight. The four royals were loaded into the back of the truck, along with the three younger partisans and such equipment as they had managed to loot at the lodge. Kelso, Kelly and Maxine took the cab. The surrounding woods were very heavy with snow. But the track out had recently been cleared, and they were able to make very slow progress as the truck tilted down, axle-deep in snow, towards the river.

Maxine’s youngsters were already there, concealed in the trees and snow and around the first bridge across the river. They could barely be seen in the dim starlight, and the truck’s sidelights. Then the bridge over the railway. When the truck has passed, the young partisans might bring the bridge down. With any luck, the Militia armoured train would be derailed. In any case, it would certainly be brought to a halt in a deep and lengthy cutting. The youngsters would then cause as much carnage as they could,

before disappearing into the nearby forest. At dusk, they would rendezvous at the dam at the north end of Loch Treig, and make their way by the line back to Rannoch and Corroun on foot.

When the lorry reached what passed for the main road, they turned west, with shaded headlights. There was no way of knowing who controlled the glen or the surrounding district: it might still be local Daniels, or the Militia might have already re-established its control. Either way, a road-block could be serious trouble.

Maxine had a short-barrelled Militia carbine with her in the cab. She said she would have to shoot first at any Militia road-block; she could expect no mercy from the Militia. But she did not say why she could expect no mercy. As for rival bands of partisans: enmity with them could be just as fierce as with the forces of the state. In all senses, it was better not to put these rivalries and enmities to any sort of test.

Conditions were very wintry as their truck crept west down the glen. In places, the surface of the river was frozen. In the gorge at Monessie, an entire waterfall was frozen solid. The hamlet of Roy Bridge seemed to be empty of life. But both road and rail bridges were intact, and they got over the river. By the first sign of day they were moving through Spean Bridge: again, there seemed to be no sign of life in the place.

Then they followed the river valley of the Lochy, followed the route of General Wade's old military road from the 18th century, along the foot of the Leanachan forest and - in time - the mountains of the Nevis range. The world was entirely white, entirely silent, and seemed to be entirely innocent of life. Inside the cab of the truck, they had lifted the engine-cover, so that hot air was blown back

through the cab to the passengers behind. It was noisy and oily: but at least it was warm.

In time, they came to the bridge over the Lochy river. Then they saw a a pair of Paramilitary trucks parked beside the bridge, and a few uniformed troopers standing in the snow. A pair of plain-clothes civilians was with them.

Maxine said instantly, 'They're police, senior ones too'.

Kelso said, 'I don't like it'.

'I'll do the talking', Maxine said with authority, 'stay quiet and I will handle them. Do you have any American dollars?'.

And they drove on, just as the girl had ordered.