

Thirty-seven.

Kelly and the young partisans had found a half-track which would take them up and over the shoulder of the mountain when the moon rose. They had explored every house and every building in the hamlet by the sea. All the boats hauled on the beach clear of the tideline had been smashed open beyond repair. Most of the houses had been destroyed too, for fear that they might afford shelter to vagabonds and outlaws, and their roofs were punctured or torn down.

But in a concealed shed on a track leading west from the little village, they found a half-track carrier of the sort used for mountain-work in the deer-stalking season. It was not clear if the machine dated from the establishment of the Protectorate's hunting preserve, or earlier, but it had a sheltered cab for passengers, and an open cargo space for stags and hinds being taken down from the hill in autumn and winter weather.

One of the children found it as a result of peering between the coarse timber slats of a door. Then he got onto the roof of the building, and broke in by an upper window. In moments, the children got the engine running and had backed the half-track from its garage. Someone had secured a gigantic set of antlers on the front of the machine. The children scoffed at the idea that they these antlers belonged to any red-deer stag. All the hunting preserves in the north had been stocked with moose as well as wolves. Then they drove the machine in triumph back to the inn.

When the moon rose, they left. They loaded the royal party into the cab, where it was warmer, and the young partisans rode on the cargo bay. The track through the village to the last of the

houses was easy going. But then the track ended abruptly, and they had to search out a route forward; and upwards. They crossed a level piece of land in complete darkness, and then it was necessary to ford a stream directly under the shoulder of the mountain. High above them, the moon was ripe and half-round and for a moment it perched exactly on the rim of the summit. Then it moved, and when they watched it, they could see that it was - as always - moving quickly.

Then the footpath began and they followed it as best they could, though it was an ancient route for pack-animals, and even the half-track made difficult work of it. Much of the time it was difficult to say where the track ran on account of the deep snow. On other occasions it could be clearly seen, but it ran across steeply sloping sheets of ice-covered rock on which the half-track slipped and plunged alarmingly. Once, the machine slid clean off a sheet of rock and fell into a peat bog below. The engine kept running: if it had died at that point, they would have been unable to restart it. The children riding on the cargo flat were hurled onto the hillside, and the royals tossed violently against the side of the passenger cab.

An exceptionally steep section of the footpath came next, which served a dual purpose as the bed of a stream, and the half-track clawed its way up among the rock, its tracks flinging sparks in the night. At one point it was necessary to skirt a precipice that fell away very steeply to their left: and then to cautiously move round the edge of a dark peat-bog in which the entire machine and complement of passengers would have been drowned.

But already they could see the bay and the hamlet spreading out below them: and when they approached the top of the pass, they could see the sea to the west, dotted with dark islands. And then

they were truly at the top of the pass, and it was time for Maxine and her young partisans to return whence they had come. The moon was still high in the sky, but already it had swung into the north west. Far down below they could see the glitter of water, and beyond that the trees and grim little snow-covered summits of Shona.

The king and his family got out of the passenger cab to wish the children well. Maxine urged that the half-track be moved a little, so that it did not sit on the skyline against the moon,

The king said, 'Why don't you come with us? I am sure we could manage another four'.

But the children wanted to go back and rejoin those they had left at Inverlair and Rannoch and Corroul. And Maxine said they would have to hurry.

She said, 'We will have to make as much distance as we can by daybreak. Otherwise, we are in trouble'.

The girl sketched an imaginary plan on the warm bonnet of the half-track.

With absolute confidence she said, 'This is what will happen. They are searching already. They will know by now who they met at the bridge over the Lochy. And they will have a very good idea where we are headed. It's got to be this part of the coast. So, soon after daybreak, they will have spotter planes out. They will fly low, and they will follow the coastline. They will also have patrol boats out in the daylight. If they see you, then they will come for you by land. And they will come in force'.

Kelso asked, 'Are there airstrips?'

But Maxine said the nearest was miles away, on the drowned moor at the head of Loch Linnhe.

‘They will come one way or two ways’, she said. ‘If they follow us as far as Glenuig, then they will run into us on our way back. We will be able to hold them off, maybe for a day. That will be enough for you. But if they come the long way, by Salen, you won’t know anything about it until they are here. So if they see you, you are in trouble’.

‘And what about you four?’, the king asked, ‘how will you spend the winter?’

Maxine said they would make their way back to Tulloch, and then follow the railway as far as Corroul and Rannoch. If the rest of the children were still there, they would strike north at night, and try to find a part of the country which had not yet been retaken by the Militia. This wouldn’t take long; and in a few weeks they would be at the spring equinox. Then the days would start to get longer, and the weather would start to improve.

‘And then I will start looking for my young brother’, Maxine said wistfully, ‘if he is still alive’, .

‘What is his name?’, Kelly asked.

‘Tommy’, she said.

‘Try Comrie at first’, Kelso said. ‘He was alive and in Comrie just a few days ago’.

‘You spoke to him?’

‘Yes, we spoke to him and he was well’.

Maxine stared at him for some long moments and looked as if she might start to cry. But all she said was, ‘Thanks for taking us. They would have shot us all at Perth if we had stayed there another night’.

All four children walked back up the path to the ridge above it. In outline against the moon, they looked strikingly young and

enormously dangerous. They seemed to bristle with weapons: someone called a greeting, four arms were raised in salutation: and then they slid below the horizon and were gone from sight.

Now the path dipped very steeply as they began to come down from the summit of the pass over the mountain. As the moon fell on the other side of the hill, it also became very dark. The half-track scratched and slithered over bare rock and sheet-ice; at times, it seemed as if it might begin to slide downhill entirely out of control. Then the bare hillside gave way to wooded and boggy ground, and the going became easier, though the snow was still deep. And finally the path levelled, and began to run close along the side of the sea until it reached a boathouse, where it broadened into a regular track for wheeled vehicles.

‘This is it’, Kelso said. ‘We wait here until we can get over’.

They drove the half-track hard in against the wall of the boathouse for fear that a spotter plane might catch sight of it in the morning. Kelly herded the royal women into the boathouse, and got a small driftwood fire going. There was a boat there, but its bottom had been smashed open, beyond repair.

Kelso and the king stood outside, and looked across the narrow sound.

‘How far does it go back?’, the king asked.

Kelso said it all depended on the tides. Sometimes the channel filled with silt and was almost always dry. At other times, the tide sluiced the silt away and the channel never dried.

Suddenly the king said, ‘You have been here before?’

‘Yes’, Kelso said, ‘I trained here for a time in the war. We both did’.

'I see', the king said, 'now I begin to see': as if indeed he really did begin to see.

And of course, Kelso said, there were patches of dangerous quicksand on the crossing.

'That's why it has to dry before it is safe to cross'.

'So how far will it go back?', the king repeated.

Kelso said he didn't know. They would have to wait for the morning and watch to see if the tide went back far enough.

'And if it doesn't?', the king asked.

'Then they catch us', Kelso said. 'From here, there is nowhere else to run to'.