

Thirty-nine.

In the morning, not long after daybreak, the first of the search planes went overhead. For the remainder of the night they had sheltered in the boat shed on the shores of the channel. Kelly had built a fire at one end of the shed, and this had kept them warm and offered some light to the company for a few hours. Then the fire began to die and it did not seem worthwhile to add more wood, for fear that smoke would be seen when the day lifted.

And this proved to be a wise precaution, for it was not fully bright when they heard the plane. Kelso had posted the princesses to watch the tideline and tell him the moment the water started to go back. The girls were the first to hear the plane. Already it was very close, and flying very low. Moments later, with its engines shut down and flying at minimum altitude, it appeared at the western entrance to the channel, flew down the north channel, skipped over the narrows, cruised up the length of the loch and then disappeared into the glen at its head. They listened intently as the sound of the engines sank in the hills: then, without any warning, they were coming back, and the plane flew back down the loch and channel, but this time at a much greater height. Then it headed south, and seemed at length to have gone for good.

‘That’s it started’, Kelso said. ‘If they see any of us now, we’re finished’.

‘Do you think they saw the half-track?’, Kelly wondered.

The king asked, ‘Do we have to cross in daylight or can we wait for darkness again?’

‘In daylight’, Kelso said, ‘we have no choice. We have to cross when the tide has gone back’.

‘It has started to go back now’, one of the princesses said. ‘It has definitely started to go back’.

But there was no way of knowing how far it would retreat, no way of knowing if the waters would recede enough to allow them to cross. And in any case, it would be hours yet before they would be able to try.

For some time they attempted to repair the boat. It was a standard clinker-built dinghy with a transom stern, copper clenched. The king said it was probably built from larch. Someone had taken an axe and smashed through some of the planks below the waterline: easy to repair with the right piece of seasoned wood and simple hand tools, of course. But there were no tools of any sort, except for the axe: and anyway both oars had been cut into short lengths to render them useless, even as emergency paddles.

Now, there was nothing to do but wait for the tide. The narrows were barely a hundred yards wide at their shortest crossing point. If the tide went back far enough, then a narrow path might dry right across the sound. They would be able to flee across this path dryshod and quickly, just as long as no search plane flew overhead as they did. Then, it would be a matter of waiting for the tide to cover their path, and block any pursuers from crossing by the same method.

All morning, the tide inched back on the shoreline. At noon, the sun seemed to stand still in the sky for minutes on end, and for those same minutes the tide too seemed to stand still on the beach. Then the sun began to move again, and with it the tide. For the next hour, it shrank a little more, but soon its movement was barely perceptible on the beach. Now everyone watched the tideline from the front of the boathouse as it moved by tiny fractions across the

sand. There was still a vast expanse of water separating them from the other side of the channel.

‘How deep is it?’, the king asked. ‘We could wade if it is not too deep’.

But Kelso said there was no way of knowing if it was shallow enough to wade. And even then, there was no way of knowing where the shallowest path would be.

‘Get it wrong’, he said, ‘and we could be into the quicksands. Or be swept away. Once the tide starts to flow, there is a very strong current’.

Suddenly, the king said, ‘Were you here for long?’

‘Not long enough’, Kelly said.

Kelso said, ‘Fate parted us’.

‘And now it has put you back together again?’

‘That depends’, Kelly said, ‘on whether we can get out of here tonight’.

For what seemed an infinity of time, they all watched the tide move by fractions on the sand. And then as they watched, as if by some sort of miracle, right across the channel a narrow path of sand and mud began to show above the water.

They rushed to the beach and began to cross as quickly as they could. There was barely a matter of yards between the tideline on each side of them. Mid-way the sand gave way to soft mud, and the king began to sink in it. The king had to be supported and then dragged through this mud. And then they were over. The crossing had barely taken a minute or two, though it seemed like hours. Already, the tide was closing on the path behind them. Even as they watched, they saw the water meet in one solid sheet of silver. There

was no way at all of knowing how deep or how shallow the channel was now.

They at once dived into the thick pine trees that covered the islet. Kelly remained concealed in the trees to watch across the channel. Almost at once, Kelso and the rest came to the other side of the islet. They found a log cabin, which looked out on more water studded with rocks and shallows. Everywhere, there seemed to be thick evergreens, and in the background bare snow-covered hills. Between a forehead of mainland and a densely wooded islet, a drying isthmus had a gaunt and ruinous castle tilting on its tip.

They were barely in the cabin when one of the princesses said, 'There are people over there'.

And indeed there were. From the window of the cabin, a pair of figures could be seen walking out on the drying isthmus. Kelso tracked them with the binoculars. Then the figures disappeared into the castle, but they soon reappeared on its walls. When they turned to look over towards Shona, it was clear that they were the plainclothes police who had stood at the bridge over the Lochy the previous morning. They stood on the castle walls for five minutes, and then returned by the isthmus. Kelso did not see them again.

'When do we go out?', the king asked at length.

Kelso said, 'Tonight. We think it is tonight. If the Americans come'.

'And if they don't come?'

'Then the police and the Militia will find us tomorrow'.

There were perhaps two hours until it got dark. They would not move until then. They dared not light any fire, or show any smoke. But it would not be a long wait. Once it was dark, they would move over the low isthmus that separated the islet from the

island of Shona proper. Then they would take the shore path to Baramore, and wait for the Americans. If they came. And if they did not come - then they would wait until the forces of the Protectorate came to arrest them, and shoot them down.

Within twenty minutes, Kelly came through the trees from her watching place.

She said, 'Two police cars have just arrived at the boat shed at the end of the road'.

'How deep is it?', Kelso asked.

'Inches', she said, 'it wouldn't come over their ankles yet'.

'There's nothing we can do now', Kelso said, 'we will just have to wait. And to hope'.