

Nineteen.

Early Saturday morning, and the snow had stopped. Charlie and Fiona read through the Mail and the Telegraph in the buffet at the Stalingrad station, while they waited for their train to the south-west.

The papers were awash with tidings of the great compromise. The government had decided to negotiate with all responsible elements. All that was required was an end to the rioting and industrial violence, and a closedown of the general strike which had spread like wildfire in the previous days.

Overnight in London some of the Tube lines had re-opened, and a number of main-line rail routes were expected to be fully operational by lunch-time. There had been rioting in the station during the heady days of the strike, but it had been suppressed by the Militia. Now there was no sign of trouble, though the station was still heavily patrolled by Specials.

The Plymouth train was due to leave at ten, but a tannoy announcement said that there was a problem with locomotives. The strike on the railways had dislocated their free movement, and a number of trains was still abandoned in the countryside. Then a locomotive became available but passengers were warned that no guarantees could be offered as to whether they would reach Plymouth. Some trains had come under attack from armed bands of train-robbers. As a result, the train would carry a heavy guard of Militia as far as Basingstoke.

Charlie said, 'We better try to get on and get a seat'.

There was a credentials-check at the platform barrier, but their security papers got them through without trouble. They found a carriage towards the front of the train, just behind the locomotive. A

gang of women in prison clothes was coaling the tender with wooden shovels. The driver and fireman loafed on the platform, smoking and gossiping. A Specials sentry with a rifle and bayonet lounged on the footplate. The driver asked Fiona for one of her newspapers and she gave him the Mail. He made some joke, but it was inaudible, and they found themselves a compartment. The seats were red plush and there were starched linen headcloths bearing the name of the company.

‘I wonder if there is a bar aboard?’, Charlie said.

Half an hour later, their train was waved out of the station. Other trains were arriving as it left. It looked as if the strike on the railways was collapsing. Responsible talks in a spirit of constructive concern for the national good would resolve any outstanding matters - or so a very long leader in the Telegraph said. And the full majestic vengeance of the law, soberly armed with boot and bayonet, would be reserved for the rest.

At Basingstone, the Militia guard was replaced by one from the county Yeomanry. They were all young lads, farm workers for the most part, and had all been drinking. They were armed with old Lee Enfield rifles, and patrolled the train looking for trouble. Two joined Charlie and Fiona in their compartment, attracted by the girl from the city. But when they were shown the security passes, they backed off, as country boys do. They were enthusiastic about the prospect of an attack on the train. They had never seen fighting, yet. They had joined up for the money - it was far better than working for a farmer. And anyway the farms had been taken away from the farmers. Some still owned their land, but not many. And they got sent to prison-camp if they employed paid labour. They could only

use free labour from the prison-camps, and these people were all from the city and knew nothing about farm work.

‘They can pull carts’, one of the lads said with a guffaw, ‘but they can’t pull a plough. It doesn’t matter how many you yoke into it’.

One of the lads produced a hip-flask in solid silver. He offered it round the company and though Fiona declined the offer, Charlie took a swig. It was very good brandy, and he asked where it had come from. He said he hadn’t tasted brandy like that in a long time. Emboldened by the convivial spirit of this policemen from the city, the boys opened up.

‘We don’t just get paid to be in the Yeomanry’, one of them said. ‘We get perks as well. All the big houses have been broken up. Most of the rich ran away when they could, so their houses have been empty for ages. The officers get the best pickings of course, but we get to take whatever is left’.

‘And the Daniels’, his friend said. ‘There are lots of them out on the moors, over to the west. Some of them have even attacked churches. We go hunting for them sometimes, and we’re allowed to take anything we like. Not that they have much, they want to do away with private property’.

The lad sounded outraged at the notion, and passed the brandy around again. He peered out into the snow-covered countryside, as if hoping for a partisan attack on the train. But there was none on their sector of the line, and at Axminster they left the train to return to their barracks at Basingstoke.

Thereafter, the train was undefended. The line looped inland for a time, through rolling hills, and then swept back to the coast, all the way to Plymouth. By now it was quite dark, and there was a

delay while the engine was coaled and watered. Fraternal marines swarmed in the station, crop-headed, and heavily armed. Then the train headed west again, over the river and into Cornwall. From the rail-bridge, there was nothing to see but the red and green lights of vessels ploughing up and down the river, mute and peaceful in the dark.

‘Not long now’, Fiona said.

‘Did you take Johnson’s diary?’, Charlie asked.

‘Yes’.

‘And the cocaine?’

‘What do you think?’

‘Who would have expected Johnson to be dealing in it?’, Charlie wondered.

They left the train at Truro. They found a hotel opposite the station and stayed there for the night. A wedding party was under way in the lounge, and nobody paid them the slightest attention. And in the morning there were fresh eggs and good bacon for breakfast, and bloaters with toast and butter. Without difficulty, they got a taxi soon afterwards, which took them towards Penryn. The driver tried to make conversation, but soon gave up the attempt.

At the police station in Falmouth, the local co-ordinator for the south west was waiting. He was clearly a local copper who had never been out of the district. He might have been a fisherman on his day off, even; but as he said, he was on standby for the local lifeboat crew, and nobody ever knew when they might be called out.

He said, ‘We can go out to Manacle Point first of all and then come back here if you like’.

‘As you think best’, the visitor from faraway London said.

They took a police Riley and drove out to Gweek. The Helford River brimmed with ocean. The driver said it was high water and they wouldn't see any rocks unless there was a swell coming in. At St. Keverne, they looked down on the open sea at last. It seemed a very long way from the office in Victoria. The sky was blue and clear and the sea flecked with foam. A stiff breeze was blowing in from the west, and little fishing boats with tanned mizzens struggled into it.

'This is where I was born', the copper said with immense pride. 'Born here and I have never left here. You wouldn't catch me wanting to live in the big city'.

Charlie asked where France was and the copper said they wouldn't be able to see it. Too far away, and too low. But he extended an arm and said that he was pointing south.

'How far?', Charlie asked, feeling out of his depth already.

The copper said a day's sailing time or thereabouts: as if precision in these matters consisted of something other than mere distances.

'How long would that take?', Fiona asked.

'Depend on the size of boat miss, wouldn't it?', the copper said, 'and the wind'.

He had brought a nautical chart with him and he spread it half-folded on the bonnet of the Riley. It was called St Ives to Dodman Point.

'This is the Lizard, miss', he said. 'And that's the race off the point. You don't want to get in there or you're in trouble. Especially in poor weather. Course, you can go inside, in among the rocks if the tide is right and you know what you're doing. But these rocks

are not for beginners. This side of the Lizard is Kennack, and then Black Head’.

‘Rocks’, Charlie said.

The copper said he had brought with him the full report from the naval patrol. He understood a synopsis of it had been sent up to London from the patrol headquarters in Plymouth. But a copy of these reports was always sent down to Falmouth as a matter of course.

‘That’s Coverack down there’, he said. ‘And there’s Porthoustock just to the north of Manacle Point. Porthallow is to the north of that again, before Gillan Creek’.

Charlie asked to see the report of the naval cordon. The vessel on duty had been a triple petrol-engined torpedo boat. It had been a night of heavy fog. She had followed a standard patrol routine of square searches along the coast from the Runnel Stone all night.

‘What’s the Runnel Stone?’, Fiona asked.

‘It’s a rock, miss, off Land’s End. There’s a light buoy on it, mind’.

The copper opened the chart full-out on the bonnet.

‘See’, he said, ‘here’s the Runnel. They would work over the mouth of Mounts Bay, round the Lizard and then along the shore as far as the Dodman’.

The master of the patrol boat said they had searched their box all night without incident. Once or twice during the night, the fog had lifted but then closed in again. When it became very thick, it was necessary to reduce speed and double the lookout. A number of big vessels had passed them towards the Runnel Stone: they could hear the fog-signals clearly, though they had trouble estimating

distance-off. They had had to keep a very careful plot indeed, though the navigator managed a very quick running fix off the Lizard when the fog had lifted. But that was the last position they had been able to get.

‘See, miss, this is their course’, the copper said. ‘Here they are coming past the Lizard not long before it got bright in the morning’.

‘This is the actual chart they used?’, Charlie asked.

‘Course it is, sir. We asked them for it, soon as we heard you were coming down’.

The copper’s blunt finger traced a pencilled line that ran north east from the vicinity of the Lizard.

‘Here, miss, you can cross refer this with their log-book. We got a copy of that too. We like to do things properly down here, you know’.

Charlie said warmly, ‘I can see that’.

‘At five o’clock in the morning, they were by reckoning off the Manacles. Here’s their position, this little mark. You can cross check with the log entry. There was still a lot of fog. Then they headed north east at ten knots. That’s slow for these boats. Sometime before six, they were here, seven miles to the east. The fog had lifted where they were, but it was still lying on the coast. It does that, miss. Now, this is when they spotted the French crabber. They come over all the time, but we can’t check all of them. That’s when her skipper opened his throttles and came back here as fast as he could. But the Frenchman dived into the murk at once, some of these luggers are very fast. You wouldn’t believe how fast some of them are in the right breeze. So when the patrol boat came into the fog, of course he had to slow right down. He was running into

danger. There are thirty wrecks along here, between Black Head and the other side of the Helford. And another thirty on the Manacles. So the skipper turned right round and opened the throttles again. He went out to sea, hoping that he might see the Frenchman if the fog lifted. But it stayed stuck to the coast all day, so he had lost his chance’.

‘Where did he go?’, Fiona asked.

The copper said the Frenchman must have known the coast extremely well. He had gone right inside the Manacles, which took a very steady nerve in thick fog.

‘How do you know?’, Charlie asked.

‘Because he couldn’t have gone anywhere else’, the copper said. ‘He couldn’t have beached the boat, or someone would have seen it sooner or later. And he couldn’t have gone out to sea, or the patrol boat would have seen him’.

The copper spoke with open admiration of the Frenchman’s seamanship. He had come over the Channel at night and made a landfall on the Lizard. Under sail and in thick fog. He had picked up the Manacles buoy and dodged inside it - into very thick fog indeed.

‘We don’t know for sure what the tide was doing’, the copper said. ‘But he might see the top of the Little Wrea, or at least see the water breaking on it. Then he would stem Manacle Point, maybe some sort of a running bearing by sound on the bell-buoy. He would have the Carn Du rocks to starboard, he might be able to hear the sea breaking on them. Then he would need to get past Carrag Luz and the Vervan rocks off Porthoustock. After that, he would be in the clear for running into the Helford or Falmouth’.

Charlie said, ‘So this man was skilled?’

‘Very skilled, sir, and very desperate if you ask me. Not many people would do that, unless they had something to hide’.

Charlie looked out towards the hidden rocks. It seemed hardly believable that someone would deliberately take a sailing boat in thick fog in among these rocks. Unless, of course, he was very skilled - and very desperate.

‘So where did he go then?’.

The copper said, ‘That’s the difficulty sir. There used to be a lot of smuggling here. Some people say there still is but we can’t catch them. But it means people have very sharp eyes for strangers. The Frenchman didn’t go into Porthoustock or Porthallow. He could have anchored round the back of Nare Point, that’s a good spot for a small boat. He could have gone up the Helford - but he wouldn’t get far in there without being seen’.

Fiona was bent over the chart, looking at it very closely indeed.

She said, ‘What if he doubled back and went into this place here - Coverack?’.

For a moment, the copper looked stunned. Then he recovered his composure.

He said, ‘Not at daybreak, miss. The fog was thinning. He would have been seen. And the harbour dries. You couldn’t even get in there at low water’.

Charlie said, ‘Where was the boat found?’

‘I will show you that, sir, when we go back’, the copper said.

The drove down into Porthoustock but the hamlet was barely awake. An ancient fisherman was mending nets on the foreshore: he lifted his head for a moment, and returned to the net. Gillan creek was brimful of water, but the tide had turned.

‘It dries out all the way’, the copper said, ‘you can’t get a boat in then’.

They skirted the shores of the Helford river, which was jammed with sailing fishing craft.

‘Fuel isn’t so easy to get as is used to be’, the copper said. ‘So we have just gone back to sail. Course, some of the boys never changed from sail anyway’.

By the time they reached Gweek, it could be seen that the tide had turned: the forshore was damp and glistening, and early scavengers were hunting miniature shellfish. Then they were in Penryn again, and out in the river a fleet of oyster dredgers was drying topsails in the weak morning sun. Somewhere in the village, a church bell was ringing loud and clear. A square-rigged vessel with three masts was drifting down with the tide. Hands were aloft, loosing lazy sails.

Charlie said, ‘Where’s that one going?’

‘Couldn’t tell you, sir, it’s a big harbour. But the harbour master will have a record of where she came from and where she is bound. If you would like to ask him’.

But Charlie said it wasn’t necessary. He just wanted to know what had happened to the little French crabber that had disappeared twice.

Up-river at Coombe they stopped and the copper said that this was where the boat had been discovered. Already, much of the head of the creek had dried and little boats were tilting at their running moorings. Somewhere near, more church bells were ringing. Up the river, or down; it was not possible to be sure.

‘She was seen, you see, sir’, the copper said. ‘After the naval patrol reported a Frenchman off the Manacles, we asked around.

Some lads on a sailing ship which was lying in the harbour saw her come in. Going fast too, for such a small boat. A very big lug and a tiny jigger. They only saw one man aboard her, mind. But she was half-decked. Anyway, they saw her go straight up the river and then lost sight of her. If someone was landed, we think it must have been about Coombe. Remember, the tide had turned’.

‘I don’t understand’, Charlie said. ‘What’s the tide got to do with it?’

‘He could run her onto any beach and know that she would float off again. With the flood, sir. If it was the ebb, of course, he would stick where he was’.

It was after this report that the local police had started to look for the Frenchman seriously. But they hadn’t expected to find her sunk. Someone had sunk her so that she would remain concealed for most of the day. But when the tide went back, that’s when they had found her.

‘You can do that with a crabber’, the copper said approvingly, ‘they don’t bother with engines or things like that. You just pull the bung and let them fill’.

‘So this boat was sunk deliberately?’, Fiona said.

‘We think so, miss. If you want them to float again, you just put the bung back into place and they lift with the new tide. It’s an old smugglers’ trick’.

‘So what happened next?’, Charlie said, wishing he was back in the familiar city.

‘Well, that’s what happened’, the copper said. ‘We found her at low water where she had been sunk. Then someone refloated her with the next tide and sailed away’.

‘Away where?’, Fiona said.

‘Away wherever he liked’, the copper said. ‘These Frenchies never show lights. He could slide down the river during the night. At this time of year especially. With the long hours of darkness and a fair breeze. He could be over his own side of the Channel easily by daybreak’.

‘So why was she sunk?’

‘To hide her, of course, miss. Nobody can think of any other reason’.

‘But we don’t know for sure if someone was brought in?’, Charlie said.

‘We never saw anybody, sir. These Frenchies come over with lobsters all the time. It’s a cash business. Very close, they are. They don’t like snoopers. Whatever uniform they might be wearing. Just the same as here, really’.

The copper drove them back into Truro. There were no church bells to be heard here. Perhaps, of course, they had finished ringing, and morning service had begun.

But the copper said, ‘They don’t ring bells here any more. There were some nasty outrages a year or two back’.

The copper dropped them at the railway station. It was deserted of life and nowhere seemed open to offer refreshment to passenger or passer-by.

The copper asked, ‘Are you going back to London, sir?’

Charlie said that they would get the first train back. The copper said there was a train in an hour for Newlyn. It would go back for London in the late afternoon. They would have a long wait in that case.

And he added, ‘There’s a gale coming in tonight. It will bring snow on the higher ground once you get inland’.

‘How do you know?’, Fiona asked.

The copper looked at her in wonder and amazement.

‘Can’t you tell, miss? You can feel in in the air’.

But this was a shadow of perception which was lost on the visitors from the city. The copper returned to Falmouth and his fireside with best wishes for their return journey. A timetable was displayed in the station, among the recruiting posters for the Yeomanry. It said that the only west-bound train of the day would come through in an hour.

Fiona said, ‘We’re not going back to London yet, are we?’

‘I wish we were’, Charlie said. ‘It’s beginning to feel like the edge of the world down here’.

They sat in the station until the west-bound train came. There was no sound anywhere in the town. When the train came it emptied itself of a handful of passengers. The two strangers boarded, but the train stood in the station for half an hour, for no discernible reason. Then it left quite without warning. More than ever, it felt like they were heading for the end of the earth. There were still some hours of daylight left. And there was still no sign of a storm sweeping in from the Atlantic.

Fiona said, ‘I didn’t know England went on for so long’.

It seemed an appropriate point to make. There was a delay at Redruth. A squadron of Yeomary, under the control of men in civilian cothes, was marshalling a column of prisoners on the platform. The prisoners were barefoot and yoked together with chains. Most had been branded at some time in the past: on the cheeks, on the forehead. But they did not board the train: perhaps they were waiting for the east-bound service, towards London.

Then the sea appeared, grey and merciless to the north, and the drying flats at Hayle. Fiona studied Johnson's diary but could make nothing of it.

'It's in some sort of code', she said.

For a time the sea disappeared, and the white hills of tin mines were to be seen in the rolling, tumultuous landscape. But soon the sea came back into sight, this time to the south. Then they were in Penzance, and at the end of the line. The little tourist town seemed entirely closed for the winter, perhaps for all time. Of the scores of hotels, none seemed open. They waited until the train pulled out again, bound at length for London: then, they had no option but to stay. They seemed a long way from home.

They walked along the coast: the bracing air smelt of salt, but neither of them could sense any spirit of a coming gale. On the far side of the bay, St Michael's Mount loomed strangely. In Newlyn, they found a hotel and were given accommodation for the night. No questions were asked, and they were led to a room which looked out to the sea. Already, the Gwavas Lake was flecked with white water.

'Do you know where the house is?', Charlie asked.

It was clear that they would get no food, at least until much later. They might as well take a look before it was dark. From the window of their hotel, across a little square, they could see a gibbet on a concrete plinth. It was empty of life, like the rest of the town.

Fiona said, 'We have a map. We have a description. We can find it'.

They walked for a time at the harbour. The fleet was in, mainly sailing fishermen working gill nets and pots and lines. A dozen steam and diesel trawlers were tied up at the head of the

harbour, and seemed abandoned. The piers were empty, though a blizzard of sound roared from a pub at the far end of the harbour. A little out to sea, a two-stick lugger was making port. She dropped a topsail, and then the mainsail. Under foresail alone, she coasted through the narrow harbour mouth and came alongside the harbour wall in absolute silence. A dozen men lay on nets, in attitudes of exhaustion. Still in total silence, they tied their little ship to the seawall with a minimum of effort. Great ponds of silver fish lay all over the deck.

Charlie and Fiona walked south from the town. A little to the east, the Low Lee buoy was dancing at the turn of the tide. A pair of naval patrol torpedo boats in line astern cruised into the bay, slowed right down. They cruised round the shoreline, and then were lost against the bulk of St Michael's Mount.

Charlie said, 'We don't have long until the dark'.

Fiona said, 'It can't be far now'.

Above Mousehole, they found the house they were looking for. It was a four-square building, two-storey, in unforgiving grey stone. At one end, a glass summer-house gazed at the sky in perfect innocence.

'How do we get in?', Fiona said. 'There might be someone there'.

'Leave that to me', Charlie said, and he sounded as if he meant it too. 'Just let me get back to the city afterwards'.

Fiona said, 'And there is an old Daniel settlement up the hill somewhere, we might want to go there'.

The house seemed to be empty. And the front door was unlocked. They made their way cautiously into the ground floor. Charlie called gently, but there was no reply.

He said, 'This had better be the right house'.

Fiona said, 'I think I have worked out the code in Johnson's diary'.

She said this so plainly that for a moment Charlie missed the significance. Then it hit him. But she said there was more work to be done. She would tell him later. If her hunch proved to be sound.

In the summer-house, the sound of the wind was magnified. It was perfectly clear that someone had been there recently. But it was not possible, of course, to say when. Scores of framed canvasses were stacked against walls.

Fiona said, 'The report says she is a painter'.

A few of the frames contained sketches in charcoal. It was not clear if they were finished works, or studies for works in progress. But most were clearly finished oils. Some showed little boats struggling into harbour under reduced sail. Others were studies of fish wrapped, or half-wrapped, in newspaper: bright blue fish, streaked with silver.

'Mackerel', Charlie said, dimly recalling some forgotten childhood memory. 'The fastest fish in the sea'.

'What's this?', Fiona said, sounding shocked.

She dragged one canvas from a pile. In some grimy and nondescript village, a naked figure swung from a gibbet. In the background, an indistinct crowd looked on without apparent comment. The naked figure was wearing a tall dunce's cap, and had been shaved entirely of hair. It was quite naked, apart from the cap and white clerical collar it wore.

Charlie said, 'We're police. We police the state, we don't run it. It's not our problem'.

Fiona said, 'This is what he meant by outrages, isn't it?'

On a table, two empty vodka bottles lay on their sides. The label of each showed a pair of flaxen maidens in scarlet kerchiefs marching from an ocean of rippling corn. They were holding adjacent hands, while each in the other hand held aloft a shining sickle.

‘What’s this?’, Charlie said.

He had found in a corner, hidden in a pile of newspapers, a single issue of Ottoman Studies.

He said, ‘Johnson had one of these, didn’t he?’

But it was not the same issue. And most of it wasn’t in English anyway.

They made their way upstairs, and found a pair of bedrooms. From the windows, they could still see the Low Lees buoy, which was now tilting in the tidal stream. They rifled through drawers and cupboards, but found nothing.

Charlie said, ‘There is nothing here. All we had was a rumour reported from some local policeman that a stranger had been in the village. They are all weird in places like this. If they knew we were here, they would report us too. We should have gone back to London when we could’.

Fiona said, ‘Just look at what we have. We know there are rumours that someone has been called in. We know half a ton of cocaine was taken in Scotland. Along with a radio transceiver. And two people were shot dead. We have reports that someone left Spain - maybe someone who had fought there in the civil war and who was on special operations in the war’.

‘He’s supposed to be dead’, Charlie said.

‘But maybe he is not’, the girl replied. ‘We know someone was in France, on the coast of Brittany. We know he left France. By

boat, probably. And we know that someone came in here by crabber from Brittany. We have heard about it all day'.

'But we don't know if he stayed here', Charlie said, 'and even if he did, we don't know where he has gone'.

'He is a Scotsman', Fiona said, 'and my father was one too. You can't trust them too far. We know from the local police that a stranger was here. Just after the Frenchman hid his boat at Falmouth. It has to be a good bet'.

Charlie said he doubted it, doubted it all. They went downstairs. Already it was getting dark, and the Low Lee buoy could no longer be seen.

Fiona said, 'We broke-up a cocaine ring when we took the half-ton. We shot dead two of their couriers. It's obvious. They have another run planned. They had nobody to do it for them. So they called in someone else. Living in Spain. I don't know why, but it doesn't matter. They got him over to Brittany. Then they took him over here by boat'.

'And where is he now?', Charlie asked, 'if he ever existed?'

It was getting dark quickly, and the first stirrings of the gale could be heard. Fiona prowled the lower floor of the house: a dead dining room, an equally dead reception room decorated with oil-paintings of mackerel. In the back of the house, she found a kitchen, un-modernised since the house had been built.

Then she screamed. Very loudly. When Charlie came, she was still screaming. She had walked straight into a body. Above one of the enamel sinks. The sinks were stained with paint. The body was hanging from a hook set in the ceiling, from which clothes were supposed to dry. It was the body of a woman, fully dressed, and complete with coat and shoes. Brown, lace-up, shoes, of a

sturdy type suited to country living. Charlie touched the body and instinctively recoiled.

He said, 'It is still warm. This only happened this afternoon'.

'She knew we were coming', Fiona said with absolute finality.

'Who did this?', Charlie said. 'Or did she do it herself?'

Suddenly, a telephone began to ring somewhere in the house. It sounded grotesquely loud, somehow.

'Leave it', Charlie said.

'Will we tell the local police?', Fiona wondered.

'Let them find it for themselves', Charlie said. 'There's a train tomorrow morning. We can get back to London before anyone knows we have been here'.

Fiona said, 'The man we are looking for stayed here. This is where he stayed. We can be absolutely certain of that. If nothing else'.

Charlie said, 'We need a name for this man'.

And Fiona said, 'I think I know how to get it now'.