

Twenty-six.

As it got later, so it got colder. There was no moon; perhaps there would be one as the night grew older. The comet which had earlier risen over the horizon, had disappeared. While Kelso kept watch to seaward with the binoculars, Kelly lay on her back in the rocks and watched the stars. Among them all, the Plough stood out against the night. People said if your eyed followed the direction of its pointers, they would be brought to Polaris himself, somewhere above the Pole. But people also said that pigs could see the wind: and tonight it was not possible to see this single star. Perhaps the sky was clouding over, and a change was on the way in the weather. Kelly sat up abruptly and scanned the sky. And indeed in the far west, towards the horizon, the sky was turning opaque. No stars were to be seen there at all.

She bent double among the rocks, cradling a cigarette and lighter inside her jacket. But still, there seemed for a moment a tiny sense of illumination around them. Kelso eased the binoculars from his eyes.

‘Nothing’, he said, ‘nothing at all’.

To the north west they could vaguely sense the rounded bulk of Mull. To the south the lighthouse on Fladda was still stabbing away into the night. The tide had turned and was now flooding strongly. For a moment you could almost hear it sluice through Cuan sound, a mile or so to the south east. And the current was running hard over the spit of rocks that ran below them out into deeper water. There was a sense of a gigantic beast, inexorable, invincible, slowly encircling their islet with infinite power, infinite resolution.

‘What time is it?’

‘Just after midnight’.

Kelly took her turn with the binoculars; but there was nothing to see at all. And then, at almost exactly the same moment, they saw the patrol boat - by some trick of the light, perhaps, they glimpsed for a moment the faint shape of a vessel under way at the mouth of Cuan Sound. For some seconds there was a clear sensation of shape, perhaps of the foam of broken water at a forefoot: and then it was gone.

‘Jesus’, Kelly breathed, ‘I didn’t think they could come through there’.

‘Which way is it headed?’, Kelso said. ‘Is it coming this way?’

But it was not yet possible to see.

‘Is it our American friends?’

‘Perhaps it is a fishing boat’.

‘It’s too big. And why isn’t it showing lights?’

‘It can’t be a Militia patrol, can it?’

There was no reason to suppose that the unknown vessel would concern itself with the islet and its abandoned and flooded slate quarries; none at all. Unless it was the Americans they were waiting for: but that seemed unlikely. Kelly said they came ashore in small boats, outboard-powered. Perhaps they would next see the boat as it cruised slowly north, so close they could call out to its crewmen, bound towards Kerrera and the sound of Mull. Or perhaps it would cruise into the west for Iona and the far side of Mull. Or west, to circle round the far side of the Garvellachs. Or south even, down by the light on Fladda, against the flood, for the western coast of Kintyre. Perhaps it was a fisherman after all, perhaps his lights were down for some reason; or perhaps, of

course, it was the impossible, and it was a Militia patrol-boat after all.

For half an hour they watched intently into the night, but they saw no sign whatsoever of the boat. For a time, it seemed to have disappeared. And then there was a sudden muffled roar of heavy chain, very close at hand: and they knew that the boat had anchored under the lee of the island.

‘Where is it?’, Kelso asked urgently.

She said, ‘Lord’s Rock, right in the mouth of the harbour’.

‘Perhaps they are just going to anchor until daybreak and then move on somewhere else’, Kelso said.

‘In that case, they will catch us’.

Another half hour passed in tense and total silence. Then a horrendous maelstrom of screaming - a primeval noise from before the days of mankind - erupted on the shore among the seabirds there. It went on for a long time, the dreadful screaming echoing off into the distance: the noise seemed to carry for miles and miles into the night.

And then Kelso said, ‘I think they are coming ashore’.

Moments later a dinghy under oars could be seen moving into the binoculars’ field of vision: a faint outline still, but the looms of the oars could be seen, dipping in rhythm and silver water running from their ends as the oars lifted and fell. And then they could hear the oars; until the dinghy itself came faintly into view.

‘Which one, which one?’. Kelly said. ‘If they land on Seil and find the car and lorry, we’re finished’.

‘If they land here and find us we’re finished too’.

‘I could kill for a cigarette’.

‘We don’t have any left’.

The dinghy disappeared in the murk. For a time they could hear the rhythmic rise and fall of the oars; and then, nothing.

‘Are we sure it’s not our American friends?’, Kelso said.

‘What happens if they find our dinghy?’

‘I am afraid they will start to look for us’.

Suddenly, figures were to be seen on the beach below them. The figures were hauling their own dinghy up into the shingle, to keep it from the tide. Three figures could be seen on the beach. They had come ashore close to Lord’s Rock. They loitered on the beach for a time, and then disappeared into the far end of the empty houses. A flashlight could be seen intermittently. Then two flashlights. On the anchored boat a shaded lamp glowed; red, green, red. But they could not see what message, if any, was flashed back from the island.

The men approached the end of the village houses; their voices were now to be heard. They were very close. If they came to the little summit of the island, they would without doubt find Kelly and Kelso. And if they then waited long enough, they would be able to take delivery of one half ton of cocaine, courtesy of the American navy. Perhaps that is why they were there in the first place.

One of the visitors suddenly called loudly: not quite a shout. Had they found something of interest? The visitors had gone again from sight, and their lamps; but then they re-appeared, heading in a group back to their landing beach. The keel of their dinghy scraped on the shingle: and then they were rowing peacefully back to their little ship. They boarded, and all was quiet again.

‘What if they saw our dinghy and have decided to wait?’

Then a hand-cranked anchor windlass could be heard, sawing the chain aboard: the soft beat of the boat’s engine could suddenly

be heard, and she swung with the tide. She moved slowly out of the bay, turned west round the rocky point, and cruised gently into the north. Quite soon, she was gone against the darkness of Insh. After that, there was no more sign of her.

Kelly said, 'If they come back when we are trans-shipping the stuff, we are in trouble'.

'Yes'.

And then she said, 'I am going to get cigarettes'.

'Jesus, no'.

But she said yes, there was a fifty tin of Capstan in the car, and she was going to row over and get them.

'What if they come back?'

But she said that they had gone for the night. And even if they came back, they would not come back as quickly as that. She would only be fifteen minutes at the most. And in moments she was lost among the rocks. Then their dinghy was scraping on the shingle, and for a moment Kelso could see it, rowed expertly, making its slow way across the channel to the shore of Seil. Then, it was gone from sight.

The night was peaceful in a truly monstrous sort of way. The murderous seabirds on the shore rocks were entirely silent. Though the sky was indeed clouded in the west, the stars could still be seen overhead. The Plough had moved into the north; there was still no sign of Polaris. Was the sky beginning, ever so slightly, to lighten? At Fladda, the lighthouse still stabbed away into the darkness: but the tide had eased, and its strange roar could no longer be heard. When the ebb finally started to run, there would be fierce overfalls off Easdale's south western point.

Without warning, and going very slowly indeed, the Militia patrol boat appeared from the shadows of the night, headed south and very close to the shore. It was still showing no lights of any kind at all: but someone on the focsle-head lit a cigarette: you could see the brief flare of fire, and the pale shadow of a cupped hand. Then, darkness. Was Kelly at the car yet? Would she too light a cigarette, like a position-flare in the night? The Plough seemed to have moved some more in the sky.

The patrol boat moved cautiously over the mouth of the narrow, rock-strewn and shallow Easdale sound. Perhaps it would now head south. But without warning it heeled to port, slowed right down, and began to nose into the sound. There was the intermittent glow of a cigarette at the bows of the boat, and the steady splash of a lead. The little vessel was sounding its way into the narrow gut between Easdale and Seil. If they touched a rock, with the ebb ready to start, they would sit there for twelve hours, until the tide lifted them off again. On Seil, there was no sign whatsoever of Kelly. She would not have seen the patrol boat. If she began to row now, she would run straight into it.

The boat slowed right down. You could easily hear its engines now. Then the skipper knocked them out of gear, and let her ghost forward. The leadsman could be heard to call softly to the helm: and a half four, four, and a half three, three, as the depth came down and down. The channel was exceptionally dangerous, even in broad daylight. Why then were they coming through at this time of night? And a half three, and a half three, three, three, and a half three, three. And a half two, two, two. They were in very shallow water now, and still gliding without power. Two beacons marked rocks at the western end of the channel. The boat slid between

them, and altered course a fraction. She was now headed directly for the pier on Seil.

The leadsman was still calling in a calm, almost casual, way, three, and a half three, three. The boat was headed now for the Easdale shore, and approaching the narrowest part of the very narrow channel. There must be very little water under her keel now. For a few moments, a searchlight played over Easdale. At one point, its beam seemed to point straight at Kelso. Then the beam swept overhead and rotated. It ran along the Seil shore, backwards and forwards. It must - it must - have crossed over the dinghy. But on the dark weed-girt shore, of course, the dinghy might be invisible. Now the boat was so close to the pier that a man might have jumped ashore. The coxwain kicked her engine astern for a moment, to check her; and then she was through, easing out past Lord's Rock into deeper water. There was still no sign at all of Kelly on the other shore. The voice of the leadsman began to call deeper water, and then it died away in the darkness. The boat slid slowly into the night; then there was a burst of power, a flash of broken water at the stern, navigation lights flashed on, and she sped away south for the Fladda light.

Ten minutes later, Kelly could be seen in the dinghy, making her slow way back across the darkened channel. Once, the little boat paused and there was the hot glow of a cigarette end; and then the dinghy came on, scrunching on the beach shingle where the tide had already turned.

She said, 'That was lucky. It's a miracle they didn't see the dinghy'.

'Where was it?'

'At the back of the pier'.

'Let's hope they didn't anyway'.

'What time is it?'

'About four'.

Kelso checked his watch. The watch said that the time was five thirty. The Plough had moved quickly in the sky; soon, they would not be able to see it.

Kelso said, 'How long should we wait'.

'Until six'.

'When is it light?'

'Some time after seven. Maybe eight'.

'I don't think they will want to be caught on the beach'.

'No, I shouldn't think so'.

And then they heard the engine; heard it a long time before they saw the boat to which it was attached. Without question, they both heard a fast-running petrol engine somewhere out in the night to the west. Kelso held the binoculars for a long time clamped to his eyes; but there was nothing to be seen at all. And then a light was seen; a light was signalling - three long white flashes, and two short one. The signal was repeated three times.

Kelso grabbed their hand lamp and signalled back: three long beams, two short. But it was not an ambitious lamp. One could only hope that it had been seen. Out in the night, the same signal came back. There was no way of knowing how often it should be repeated. The wrong response signal, the right response signal repeated too often - and they could be gone. Kelso signalled back again, three long, two short. It wouldn't be long until they knew. For good, or otherwise.

There seemed to be an immense silence now; it went on and on. Kelly was standing on the skyline, urging them onwards. Kelso

stood up too; and as he did so, they heard the engine again. For a moment it seemed to get closer, but only a moment; and then it quite clearly was going away.

Kelso said, 'Oh Christ, not now'.

They waited for twenty minutes more, and prepared to leave. It hardly seemed worth waiting much longer. They left their hiding place and made their way down into the deserted village. They stood on the shore for a moment, ankle deep in the weed there; the tide already had gone back quite a long way.

But Kelly said, 'What's that?': and moments later they heard the engine again, much softer this time. And coming towards them. Quite certainly coming towards them. And much, much closer than it had been earlier.

And then they saw the boat, coming towards them at great speed. It raced in from the darkness and sliced into the western entrance of the sound in a white and foaming arc, and ran up on the beach at one of the drowned quarries. It was not much more than twenty five yards from them. Two armed men leapt from the boat into the water, knee deep, braced in the firing position; but Kelso whistled quietly, then whistled again, and he and Kelly, with their arms raised in submission, moved towards the newcomers.

And they were indeed Americans; and in a very great hurry indeed. Their boat was an aluminium dory with two large outboard engines clamped to the transom: the engines were left running, and a third man, to his waist in water, held it off the shore in enough water to float in.

He said, 'For Christ sake, boys, don't let her dry on the beach or we will never get her off'.

Kelly had some brief words with one of the men on the shore; the boat backed off from the beach, spun and raced out towards the sea again. But at the mouth of the channel it stopped, signalled somewhere out to the west, returned to the beach, collected Kelly and Kelso, took their dinghy in tow, and moved confidently into the gut of tide within the arms of the deserted village on Seil.

‘What kept you?’, Kelly said.

A voice replied, ‘We were waiting on the other side of the Garvellachs, waiting for the Militia patrol to clear out’.

‘If they had gone round, they would have caught you’.

‘That’s what we thought too’.

‘We’ve got a two-ton lorry’, Kelly said.

Another voice said, ‘You’ll need it’: and while one man again held the boat off the beach, the other two began to offload aluminium ammunition cases and stagger up the beach with them.

‘How many in total?’, Kelso wondered.

‘Twenty this boat’, someone said, ‘and twenty the next. Our ship is as close inshore as the skipper dares to take her. After daybreak we are a sitting target for aircraft. So hurry, hurry’.

By the time the first boatload had been carried to the lorry and left stacked at the tailgate, a second boat was cruising quickly into the harbour. In the first faint stirring of daybreak, it was clear that each was much larger than had seemed to be the case just a few minutes earlier.

The moment the second boat was emptied, both were floated off into deeper water, a man at the bows tethering the little vessel to civilisation for a few moments longer. It was getting bright very quickly now. One of the Americans - it was bright enough to see in

outline the contours of his face - said with relief, 'One ton. That's a British ton. Forty cases at 56 pounds a case'.

'We were expecting half a ton'.

'You're in luck, then'.

'What's happening?', Kelso asked urgently.

The American shrugged. 'Nobody's too sure. The country is in uproar. Most of it has fallen to the rebels. There's some talk of a march on London. All our naval forces have pulled back to the west of Ireland. Nobody knows if we are going to go in now, or wait to see what happens. Where are you taking this stuff to?'

Kelly said, 'We don't know yet'.

The American said, 'I hope it was worth it. We better go. Before their morning air patrol starts. Good luck'.

He pulled from a pouch somewhere two packets, each about the size of a bag of sugar, and tossed them to Kelso.

He said, 'The other stuff is packed water-tight. The cases are sealed too, as you will see. Don't touch the seals or you might have to answer for it. But this is for assay. We tried some. Our medic says it's the best of stuff'.

Moments later, both boats had gone, the powerful outboards roaring and spurting foam in their propellor wash. Already you could see the hills of Mull quite clearly over the sound, and hear the sea-birds begin their daybreak chorus of riot and rapine.

At the lorry, they began to load the cargo. It was a two-ton ex-army machine, petrol engined, with the flatbed covered in a tarpaulin stretched and lashed over curved steel tubes.

Kelly said, 'I hope we are going to make this'

'When do we know where we take it to?'

'I have to phone colonel Jack'.

'Isn't that dangerous?'

'Do you have a better idea?'

'Do we know where he is?'

'Not yet, no'.

They began to load the machine. Kelly climbed into the dusty back of it, which was littered with shoes and personal effects. She found a leather wallet, but it was empty save for a tiny photograph of two young children. They stared out oblivious to the future and its terrors. One was smiling, the older grim-faced, as if he faced a firing-squad rather than an amateur camera.

'Where did they go?'

'It's better not to think about these things'.

Kelso hefted the cases into the lorry, and Kelly dragged them forward. They bore prominent stamps - American Granulated Cane Sugar. There were forty of these fifty-six pound cases to be hefted; by the time Kelso had finished, he could feel his arm and stomach muscles begin to complain. Then they together neatly stacked the cases at the forward end of the flatback; by now, the day was full on the coast. Somewhere close, a squadron of aircraft could be heard. Then they saw it; three planes, flying slow and very low, heading for the hills of Jura. On each wing-tip was a a red star, quite clear. They stood stock still until the aircraft had gone from sight; even waited, until they could no longer be heard.

'What about the dinghy?'

On the beach, the dinghy was dried-out; the tide was still retreating. Seabirds patrolled the tide-line; at the far end of the beach a heron, head cocked and perfectly motionless, watched them with interest. It took a passing fish almost faster than any eye

could see; and returned to its careful scrutiny of the morning's visitors.

The dinghy was a very small one, perhaps twelve feet long. It was not a boat for any sort of voyaging. But it was very light. They hauled it over the weed-covered boulders; small as the boat was, this proved difficult, and it took some time to drag the little boat up to the high-water mark. Then they dragged it into the village, and left it at the rear of an abandoned house. There wasn't any better place to leave it. The effort seemed a silly and dangerous way to greet the sunrise. Still, there was no sense of danger on the morning at all; the universe seemed so quiet as to be empty of people altogether. But then a pair of warships, frigates perhaps, or destroyers, appeared from the north, going very fast indeed. They were well out in the sound, but the great red and yellow banners on their sterns could be seen. The ships raced south and quite soon had disappeared behind their boiling wakes.

Then Kelly and Kelso started their lorry, backed it cautiously into the village street, and took their departure from Seil. It was exactly eight fifteen in the morning, and there was still no certain sign in the sky of further snow to come. But one could not, of course, be sure about this at all.

The lorry rolled and lurched over the island to the hump-back bridge which swooped over the narrow inlet that divided Seil from the mainland. It seemed wiser to stick with the back-roads so far as possible: so they drove the few miles to Kilmelfort, and then switched to the very narrow and slow track that led over the hills to Loch Awe. Not once did they encounter any other vehicle on the road, and most of the villages seemed to have been cleared of people. Near to Kilchrenan a man with dogs was herding sheep: he

carried, as if it were the most normal thing in the modern world, a heavy-calibre sporting rifle slung a shoulder. When he saw the lorry approach, his dogs cleared the road of sheep, while the man stood aside and unslung the rifle. Kelly raised a polite hand in salute; the man nodded civilly, returned the rifle to its shoulder, and whistled in a piercing way to his dogs. They drove on, the forty cases of cocaine bouncing occasionally when the road became particularly bad. The village of Taynuilt seemed not to have been cleared of its inhabitants; and though Kelly saw at one point a bright red call-box, it seemed wiser to keep going, at least for a time.

Some way into the pass of Brander, they saw in the distance the clear signs of government forces. The road was much too narrow to turn the lorry; there seemed little option but to drive on. Below the power station, there were indeed two armoured personnel carriers and a number of soldiers in uniform and heavily armed: but perhaps it was no more than the Regular guard-unit for the station, high in the hills above them, going to work. There were no Militia men to be seen, or vehicles, and they drove through without drawing any attention at all.

Kelso said, 'We won't be so lucky next time'.

'Just keep driving', Kelly said, 'we will find a telephone sooner or later'.

'Will they still be working?'

'We need a hotel too', Kelly said, 'we can't eat this stuff, can we?'

At Tyndrum, they turned right. Up to their left, at the top of the hill, a military unit was holding the road. There were perhaps a hundred men, with a road-block, and a tank dug-in by the side of the

road. When they stopped at the junction, the turret of the tank revolved and the long snout of the gun looked straight down at them.

‘Just drive on’.

‘Do you have a better idea?’

‘Just don’t hurry’.

‘In this wreck?’

They drove out onto the road south, cautiously, and down into the hamlet, while the muzzle of the gun tracked them steadily, and two men watched them carefully through large binoculars. But they got into the hamlet without trouble, and through it, though there was another detachment of military at the station. A steam-hauled military train was standing at the station, disembarking soldiers and guns. Some of the soldiers indeed, Regulars with a scattering of Paramilitaries among them, had already spilled down into Tyndrum itself, but they merely looked at the passing lorry without interest. Half a mile out of the village, they saw the same train on the track above them, heading south.

‘They are reinforcing the line’, Kelso said with sudden understanding. ‘They are dropping units and arms at every station on the line. I think we better get to Crianlarich before they do or there could be trouble’.

They drove as fast as they could; perhaps at even thirty miles an hour, on the winding single-track road. In places, it had been torn to mud by tank tracks. And near to the village they saw a unit of tanks hidden in the trees, their crews brewing tea on wood-fires. Perhaps they were waiting for reinforcements. They could see the armoured train on the line across the valley, above the river; it seemed to be catching them quickly. Soon, they would be at

another junction. Straight on for Stirling and Edinburgh, right for Glasgow. There was no other option.

The junction lay immediately beyond the lattice-steel bridge which brought the rail line over the river and into the village. As the train drew slowly over the bridge, they could see the gun crews on the flat-bed waggons looking down at them. An officer waved a sudden arm and a machine-gun mounted at the end of one of trucks suddenly swung down towards them.

‘Straight on’, Kelly cried, ‘if we go right they’ll get us at the station’: and Kelso drove the lorry through the village and into the entrance to the valley beyond. There had been very heavy rain, or heavy snowmelt, for the floor of the valley was drowned. Patches of winter trees stood forlorn in the waters. On one isolated islet, a flock of sheep was gathered, listlessly packed close together as a protection against future snowfall. The road looped and twisted along the length of the valley. In places the road was flooded but the lorry cautiously made its way through the waters. There was no other traffic to be seen at all. Once, they stopped and killed the engine. The silence was almost unbearable. Then the road began to climb a little, up among dense trees, towards Lix Toll.

Kelly said, ‘What kind of name is that?’

‘The fifty-ninth’, Kelso said. ‘They were stationed here during the war’.

At the junction, just into the road for Killin, a police patrol blocked the way. Two motor-cycle sidecar units faced each other across the highway. One of the officers had removed his cap and was smoking a cigarette. When he saw the lorry approach, he hid the cigarette and replaced his cap.

‘Shall we speak to them?’

Kelso stopped the lorry a little way into the Lochearnhead road, and Kelly strolled back to speak to the policemen. They were strangely nervous, or at least unsure of their authority. They said nobody seemed to know what was going on. They thought Aberfeldy was still in government hands; at least it had been when they had left it that morning. But partisans had seized points on the Inverness road, and were in control of the road at Blair Atholl. They had cut the railway there too; though no trains could get up anyway, thanks to the snow at Drumochter.

‘What about the Edinburgh road?’

‘Clear to Stirling, miss, but we don’t know after that’.

‘Are there any hotels still open?’

The policeman did not know. There had been mass deportations from some districts. In others, a lot of the men had been conscripted for labour and military service. Many people had taken to the hills to escape. The children among them were especially ferocious.

The policeman said, ‘What are you carrying in the lorry, miss?’

Kelly said, ‘Sugar’.

‘Look after it, miss, any sort of sugar’s worth a lot of money nowadays’.

They rolled down Glen Ogle; a train was motionless, marooned perhaps, on the high line to the west of the glen. Lochearnhead seemed empty of people. Perhaps they had fled the fighting. The hotel was boarded and abandoned. At a petrol station, they tried to find an attendant. At length, a very elderly man appeared from a cottage. He said the tanks had been emptied. Partisans had requisitioned all the petrol. There was none left at all. He seemed relieved at this dissolution of his responsibility. And he

seemed also to be telling the truth in its entirety. They did not test this, and drove on to a lay-by some way beyond the village. There, they re-fuelled from the cans they carried under the canvas, along with their cargo. The fumes wafted sharply on the winter air. It was now late afternoon. It would be dark in an hour. They would have to find a hotel soon, and a telephone, or they would spend the night driving into the unknown. That, or sleep on the cargo. And the sky looked as if it might begin to snow again at any moment. Either way, it would be very cold.

By the time it was dark, they were entering Callander. The town seemed to be untouched by the Protectorate, or by the agitations shaking the land. A great sense of order and civility reigned. There were no Militia men to be seen, no partisans, no police even. There was electric power still to the town, and in the main street the shops were bright with light and full of goods. There were numerous citizens on the pavements, hurrying home for their high teas.

Kelly said, 'Isn't this where the Plymouth witch came from?'

'It was Portsmouth'.

In a newsagent's shop Kelly got more cigarettes - Capstan again, in fifty tins - and a two-day old Daily Mail. A bright butcher's shop was on the point of closing, under a striped canopy: a stout and rubicund butcher was whistling as he scrubbed a chopping-block; rows of black, anonymous rolls lay under the window lights in pride of place. A baker's display window was empty; but gave the clear impression of having been full not much earlier.

They found a hotel at the far end of the town: a grim and granite place, with a welcoming sign directing hawkers to the kitchen door only. Kelly went to the principal door, and was welcomed by a

woman as sour and grim as her building. But yes, there were rooms.

‘One room or two?’

Kelly said, ‘Just one’.

‘Perhaps you are married’, the woman said.

Kelly said very brightly, ‘Not yet’: with crisp, convincing authority.

‘And do you expect to leave that lorry outside this hotel all night? We do have other guests, you know.’

Kelly looked round quizzically, and the woman snapped, ‘Our ladies are having their nap at the moment’.

They found a place for the lorry at the back of the hotel, while the owner sniffed with disdain. Perhaps she disapproved of the innovation of wheeled transport. Or perhaps of people younger than herself. There were no other vehicles to be seen, nor any other guests; but one sensed their presence.

She said, ‘You have just missed the police. They come to check residents’ papers every night now. Will you be here tomorrow evening?’

‘Just one night, I’m afraid’.

‘I will have to report your presence to the police in that case’.

‘Would dollars be of any assistance?’

‘It’s payment in advance’.

The woman sniffed again; but dollars would not be inconvenient. And perhaps she would manage to overlook the police until tomorrow morning.

She added, ‘The electricity goes off at midnight. I suppose you want something to eat before then?’

The reception lobby was peopled with exotic birds in poses appropriate to their natural habitats. Seabirds with orange bills clung to romantically arctic rocks on the edge of painted precipices. Heath birds peered from moorland shelters. An eagle stretched its wings from some lofty eyrie. Perhaps it was lucky that they were all encased safely in glass cages. On the rather grand staircase, the carpet rods were polished brass, and the carved banister-sections in polished mahogany. Here too, there were more glass cages: weasels, stoats, otters, a big buck hare, a pair of red squirrels, a serpentine wild-cat with striped tail and bared teeth.

Their room was three floors up. It looked out onto the main street of Callander. There were two single beds in the room, perhaps as a caution against undue passion. A Bible lay open and face up on one beside table: an unknown hand had scored lines in the margin of Daniel. On the wall of their room, above the bed, was a framed photograph of the Royal family on some palace balcony, draped and tasselled in velvet. The king was wearing cape and crown, and the George and Garter was prominent on his chest. A caption said, 'Coronation Day, May, 1937. His Majesty George VI, King of Great Britain, Ireland and the British Dominions Beyond the Seas, with Queen Elizabeth and the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose, on the balcony of Buckingham Palace after the Coronation'.

Kelly said, 'These pictures are illegal! They were supposed to have been handed-in over a year ago!'

The bathroom was at the far end of the corridor. From here it was possible to peer down into the back court in which their lorry was parked.

Downstairs, there was a telephone in the lounge. But at first, the lounge was busy with the other residents. There were six of them, four single and very elderly women of the sort who had long enjoyed an income large enough to keep them in a hotel such as this. And one more, with her husband, both old too, and with the well-heeled look of the cautiously wealthy. Kelso went to the bar and got a large whisky. He tried to find a seat separate from the residents, but the attempt failed.

A radio was playing somewhere in the background. Light orchestral music; as if the ladies might shortly get up and waltz with each other. Then a news bulletin, but it was hard to hear against the chatter that broke out as soon as the music had finished. Something about a National Convention. Huge demonstrations in London. In Scotland, there had been fierce fighting around Perth between bandits and the forces of law and order. And then a final item. A gigantic search was under way in Scotland for drug-smugglers. Something about American cocaine. The police hoped to have made arrests in a matter of days.

Someone flicked off the radio. An old lady piped, 'I do hope order is restored quickly. Things seem to be completely out of hand'.

Another cried, 'These drug-dealers should be shot at once when our policemen catch them. Don't you think so?'

The old crone leaned across and engaged Kelso in conversation. 'Are you married dear?'

Kelso fled upstairs; from the bathroom, it could be seen that their lorry was still safely at the back of the hotel.

Much later, he and Kelly returned below. The lounge was empty, though the bar was still in business. Kelly tried the

telephone. The line was open, which was a start if nothing else. She had three numbers. She called the flat off Leith Road, but there was no answer. She called the colonel's little private bolt-hole opposite St. Giles. Almost at once she replaced the receiver slowly. She had gone very pale.

'What is it?'

She said, 'That was a Militia voice. I am certain'.

'Can they trace this number?'

'I don't know'.

'How many more numbers to call?'

'One. His number in London. But that could be a death sentence for all of us'.

'Try it'.

But the line to London was down. An operator said that the exchanges were in the hands of the rebels. It could be days before they were in operation again. Perhaps longer.

'Try the Leith number again'.

She tried again; and got an answer.

Kelly was speaking. 'In Callander. A hotel. Forty cases. No, no problem. Tomorrow? At nine? A lorry. Tomorrow morning. Yes, we know. I hope not. Good bye, good bye'.

The owner watched from her bar like a hawk. She said, 'That's the bar closing now. Breakfast is always at eight'.

They went upstairs.

Kelly said, 'They're closing in. They have people up from London looking for us'.

'Do we know what to do with the stuff yet?'

'Not yet', she said, 'I phone again at nine in the morning'.

Soon afterwards every single light in the town went out. Midnight. There was a fat candle in a saucer between the beds. From their high window, they looked down again into the main street of the town. It seemed perfectly safe.

An unknown hand had turned-down the covers on each of the single beds. On each, a perfectly white linen sheet was embroidered sternly with the diagonal legend in red: Royal Britannia Hotel.

‘So what is the cocaine for?’, Kelso asked.

‘Weren’t you told?’

‘It never made much sense to me’, he said.

‘For them’, she said, gesturing at the photograph of the royals on their coronation balcony. ‘For the king. And his family’.

‘But the must be dead by now’, Kelso said.

‘We don’t know now’, Kelly said. ‘When we started this, we were sure they were alive. Then we began to doubt it. Now, we just don’t know’.

And if they are alive?’

‘We take them out, of course. That is the deal - we hand over the cocaine, and we get the king and family to take away’.

‘And if they’re dead?’

‘That’s when things get really interesting’, Kelly said. ‘It could mean we have a ton of best American cocaine - all to ourselves’.