

Twenty-nine.

They woke early, under the illegal Coronation portrait of George VI and his family. From the chilly bathroom at the rear of the hotel, Kelso squinted down into the back court. Their lorry appeared to have been untouched overnight. From their room, they looked down into the main street of Callander: fresh footprints were to be seen, for there had been another fall of snow overnight.

Kelso studied the portrait of the king and family.

At length he said, 'So how much cocaine are they worth?'

'Three tons', Kelly said. 'A ton for the king, a ton for the queen, and half a ton for each of the children'.

'So how much has been sent in?'

'That's where it gets difficult', Kelly said. 'We sent in half a ton on four occasions. That left two more runs of half a ton each. But we knew it was getting dangerous. So we decided to go for a two-in-one run, and send in a whole ton. But we ran right into them. Our two drivers from Luing were shot, they got our radio, I just managed to get out'.

'A ton', Kelso said.

'Absolutely, no question about that', she said.

'So why do they say it was half a ton?'

'That's what I don't understand', Kelly said.

'And why a ton this time too?'

'Obviously to make up for the ton we lost last time'.

'So half a ton of cocaine just seems to have disappeared?', Kelso said.

'I told you, I just don't understand. But cocaine is like that, I suppose'.

From the bowels of the building a hand-bell was ringing loudly, to announce breakfast. At the bottom of the stairs, they ran into their hostess. The police had been around earlier, she said, and had passed to her the news of the night. Dunblane was in the hands of partisans, some of the desperate outlaws who had taken to the hills during the mass conscription of labour battalions, and reinforced by Daniels who were holding out in the cathedral. People said these Daniels were from England, and the cathedral authorities had called on the Militia from Perth to dislodge them. The Militia had already taken Bridge of Allan, and it was expected that Dunblane would soon fall to them.

‘What about the road to Perth?’

But her police informants had had no information on this. Stirling was in the hands of insurgents who had declared the independence of Scotland at a ceremony the previous afternoon near the field of Bannockburn. There had been heavy fighting in blizzard conditions on the Carse of Gowrie, and the Militia had retaken control of Scone Palace, though the Murray Royal had been reduced to a pile of rubble.

‘Will it snow again later?’, Kelly asked.

The hostess looked bleak as a winter hillside, and said that she could not be expected to foretell the future. A grandfather clock in the lobby was chiming eight o’clock when they went in for breakfast to the empty dining room.

‘When do you phone again?’

‘At nine’.

‘Let’s hope he is still there’.

‘Yes, let’s hope so’.

‘And if he isn’t?’

‘We better run for it’.

‘With the lorry?’

‘Do you want to leave it?’

Their hostess brought breakfast; thick home-smoked bacon, new-baked white bread, fresh eggs laid that morning at the other end of the town. There was even some marmalade: dark orange marmalade, with slices of lemon peel in it.

The lady said, ever so conspiratorially, ‘Would you like some real tea?’

Kelso said, ‘Would dollars be of any assistance?’

The lady brought tea, real tea, in a teapot, and a pitcher of milk. Also a second helping of bacon and eggs. More toast, too. The lady palmed the dollars from her linen table cloth in a flash of movement; but she did not refer to them. An open bribe, after all, is an insult to any person of honour. She had brought a copy of yesterday’s Scotsman. She apologised for the absence of sugar. It was very scarce now, very valuable.

She said, ‘I am sure you will have a difficult journey ahead of you. It’s always best to be well-fed in the morning’.

In the background, a radio was playing stirring music on a martial theme. Then some news from the BBC. The criminal rebellion of the National Convention had been overturned and order was being restored to London. An American warship had been bombed and sunk near the island of Jura in the Scottish inner Hebrides. Something to do with cocaine smuggling by imperialist bandits. And the Daily Mail had returned to the streets with a triumphant emergency edition.

The BBC newsreader read-out Lord Rothermere’s signed editorial. His lordship had quoted Bagehot: ‘in all cases, it must be

remembered that a political combination of the lower classes, as such and for their own objects, is an evil of the first magnitude. Their supremacy, in the state they now are, means the supremacy of ignorance over instruction and of numbers over knowledge'.

But it was a London-area edition only; on account of what the broadcast called continuing newspaper distribution difficulties in the rest of the country. There had been more heavy snow in the Home Counties too, but the weather was expected to ease. Then some more music from a military band.

'It's nine o'clock. You better phone'.

Kelly phoned the Leith number just once; listened in silence, while the stuffed birds and animals stared down on her with venomous intent; and they returned to their bedroom.

'We don't have much time', she said. 'That call was monitored, I am certain of it'.

'So where? And when?'

'Perth, tonight. At the prison. The Militia have retaken the town and our people are waiting for us'.

Kelso stood aside from the window of their room, and squinted obliquely through it. Two uniformed policemen were strolling towards them. They halted before the hotel, and disappeared. After five minutes, they had failed to reappear.

'Why have the police come back again?'

From the bathroom, Kelso peered down into the narrow back-court of the hotel. Their hostess stood with the two policemen beside the lorry. She seemed to be speaking urgently. The three figures moved to the tailgate and could no longer be seen. They seemed to stay there a long time; but in time they re-appeared and strolled back towards the rear entrance of the hotel. And then, not

long afterwards, both officers were to be seen at the front of the hotel, strolling back in the direction from which they had come.

‘Why did they come back here again?’

‘We better go now’.

As they left, the lady was there to see them off on their journey. She pressed on Kelly five fifty-tins of Capstan. She said they were for the dollars. She said fair exchange was no robbery.

She said, ‘Sugar is very scarce now. It is a pity I don’t have any’.

And after a pregnant silence, she added, ‘You will have to watch out for partisans. People say the children are the worst. And all those people who have escaped from the camps’.

Kelly said, ‘We will watch out for them’.

‘Which way are you going?’

Kelso said he did not know. But the woman said, with a curious tone of triumph, ‘You will have to go back north. The roads south are still blocked’.

She seemed to know where they were bound; perhaps she had been listening on an extension telephone.

She said, ‘I heard your conversation this morning. By accident. I hope you have a nice journey to Perth’.

They drove north, slowly. It was a fine morning. The sky was blue and the hills covered with snow. Even the sun was shining. The road was clear of snow and any traffic was yet to stir. At Loch Lubnaig much of the water was covered with a thin skin of ice. On the far side of the loch a column of smoke was rising from a shepherd’s or gamekeeper’s cottage. For a second, something very bright glinted in the sun; and then it was gone. A pane of glass, a sheet of iron on a roof?

'Binoculars'.

'Maybe, yes'.

'How much fuel is left?'

'Not enough if we have to go this way'.

'How far is it?'

'Fifty miles. Something like that'.

They drove on. Strathyre and Kingshouse were quiet and empty of life. So was Lochearnhead. They could see the lake glinting in the sun. There was still no traffic and the sky remained clear. Across the water Ben Vorlich was white with snow: but lower down the snow had melted. In places the road was deep under meltwater, but the lorry struggled through. At St Fillans the river had burst its banks and the road was very deep under the flood. They stopped to assess the danger; it would not be wise to break down now.

Immediately beside the road six children materialised: one was a boy of perhaps eight years, the rest perhaps of fifteen or sixteen. It was difficult to be sure: perhaps they were younger. They all wore over-size Militia knee-boots and most carried weapons. The children watched the lorry in absolute silence, absolute stillness. When it drove into the water they disappeared as quickly as they had come. But between St. Fillans and Comrie the road was blocked and more children swarmed around a burned-out Militia armoured car. There was no way past except by pulling off the road and going very slowly indeed. But half a dozen children with assault rifles stood in their way. The tallest child motioned with his rifle that they get out of the cab. He too was wearing over-size Militia kneeboots.

The boy said, 'This is a toll road now. Maybe you didn't know'.

Kelly said, 'We have some dollars'.

'What else you got?', the boy demanded, not at all impressed. 'We got dollars from this lot. Before we shot them'.

The lad gestured at the burned-out car. 'And their boots. Ten of them. We shot the lot. Thieves, they are. We don't need dollars'.

'What about tobacco?', Kelso said.

'Tobacco!', the boy cried. 'We can use tobacco, we can change it for food anywhere'.

'We have five tins only', Kelly said. 'We got them for dollars'.

'Five tins is about right for a lorry this size', the boy said.

Kelly handed over the tins of cigarettes, and the lad tossed one to his lieutenant, who tore it open and began to distribute the Capstan among the other children.

'Can we go on now?'

The boy said, 'We will need to have a look in the back first'.

Three of the children sprang over the tailboard and one cried after a moment's stunned silence, 'Sugar! They've got American sugar'.

'We're not thieves', the boy said.

Kelso said, 'I don't suppose you could give us some fuel'.

'In Comrie', the boy said. 'We got plenty there'.

With the boy and three of his band, each armed to the teeth, they drove carefully round the burned-out armoured car and set off for the town. The boy said he was called Tommy. His band had spent the winter and most of the previous autumn in one or other of the many ruined farmhouses in Perthshire. They had lived off the river and the hill, for the most part - and what they could rob from Protectorate forces. But now it was dangerous. There were said to be bands of Daniels to the east, and armed groups who had

escaped from the camps. Some were friendly, but you couldn't be sure. Tommy had been on the run for two years, from the time they had taken his father away to prison, and then conscripted his mother for labour service. Once he had an older sister. She was supposed to have died during the first winter, somewhere near the Lix Toll. But he wasn't sure that she was dead. And he didn't know where the Lix Toll was anyway.

They found an abandoned garage in the centre of Comrie, under the control of more children. They got five gallons of petrol, siphoned from a wrecked vehicle.

'Where are you trying to get to?', Tommy asked.

'Perth'.

'You won't get in', he said, 'the Militia bastards have taken it back'.

'Maybe we will go somewhere else'.

'Sugar is worth a lot of money now', the boy said wistfully. 'We could swap you one of our rifles for a case. Just one. This is a toll road, you know'.

Kelly said, 'Maybe next time? Maybe on our way back?'

The lad gave them a rifle anyway and they drove on: and in time came to Crieff. The town was devastated; it appeared to have been bombed heavily. At one point the main road was blocked and they had to detour to recover the route. Kelly drove while Kelso cradled the Militia rifle.

'How long now?'

'Twelve, fifteen miles'.

'Half an hour then'.

'If there is no trouble'.

They drove on. Methven seemed empty of people though there were signs of heavy fighting and many of the houses were burned-out. But there was no traffic, no road-blocks, no partisans of any kind. Once an observation aircraft droned overhead, very low; it was the only sign of life in an otherwise empty landscape.

On the outskirts of Perth they at last ran into a Militia checkpoint. It was reinforced with Paramilitaries in sand-bagged machine-gun nests. A deep trench had been cut across the highway; vehicles were forced to detour, very slowly, by the side of the road. A light tank, shrouded in camouflage netting, followed their progress with the muzzle of its gun.

‘Oh Christ’, Kelly said, ‘they’ve got dogs’.

The soldiers seemed to be extremely nervous. A labour unit of prisoners, under very heavy guard, was digging more trenches to left and right. Although it was very cold, all were barefoot and bare-headed. Then a guard lifted a rifle and shot one of these prisoners at very close range in the chest. When he fell, the guard finished him off with a shot to the head. The remaining prisoners continued to work without a moment’s inattention.

An officer motioned the lorry forward, and then ordered it to stop. Beside the officer, a trooper held a pair of dogs on a short leash. Kelso and Kelly were dragged from the cab at gun-point.

‘Right’, the officer said, ‘this better be good. Where have you come from?’

‘Callander, this morning’, Kelly said with great composure. ‘You can check with the police there if you like’.

‘The lines are down again’, the young officer said.

Kelly said, 'We have orders to report to the officer commanding the garrison here. On moment of arrival. You will be in very deep trouble if you prevent this'.

The young officer was English, no doubt about it. He did not seem to have slept for some days. He eyed Kelly doubtfully. Then he said, 'We will have to search the lorry. Some of the partisans have loaded trucks with explosives and driven them into our positions'.

Two Paramilitaries climbed into the lorry. The young officer asked, 'Was there any sign of partisan activity on the road?'

'Children', Kelso said, 'most of them hungry by the look of things'.

'They will be a lot hungrier soon', the officer said grimly. 'Once we have full control of the countryside we will starve them out. Then they will pay for what they have done to us'.

'What have they done?', Kelly asked.

But a voice from the back of the lorry cried, 'Sugar! They are carrying ammunition boxes of American sugar'.

The officer said, 'Smuggling and illegal trading. That is a serious crime. We can shoot looters and smugglers on sight. And anyone in contact with the Americans'.

'This consignment is for the commanding officer of your garrison', Kelly said. 'There will be very serious trouble if you interfere with this shipment. Very serious trouble for you'.

The officer said, 'We have special orders from London to look out for smugglers in contact with the Americans. Cocaine is being taken into the country and used to finance a very big espionage operation. We don't know what it is yet. But we have been warned that a shipment is due. We have our orders'.

Kelso said, 'We know nothing about cocaine. This is a shipment of sugar. It is not our fault that it is in American cases'.

'We will have to open the cases', the young officer said. 'We have orders to search everything that comes in. The town is under curfew and military law'.

Kelly said, 'Please, open them. But you will have to break the seals. And you will have to answer for that if you do'.

There was a great silence on the morning. Snow clouds were drifting in from the east. Skeletal trees stood black against the sky. A murder of crows suddenly burst from one tree, screaming in rage, or terror: it was not clear which.

'When does it get dark?', Kelso wondered.

'About four', the officer said.

'Where is the Militia headquarters?', Kelso asked.

'At the prison'.

The crows lashed blackly for a moment, and then re-settled in their tree. The prisoners in the trench stopped working for a moment, and all looked towards the small black cloud of birds dashing their wings and screaming their warnings. Somewhere in the distance, a light aircraft droned, entirely without menace.

In a tone of great gentleness Kelly said, 'You must all be very tired'.

The young officer said that none of his men had seen a bed for days: and they expected to be on duty for another night at least.

'We have the dogs, you know', he said, 'and they are trained to find drugs'.

'Take some of our sugar', Kelly said in the same gentle tone, 'and it will give your men some energy'.

Kelly passed the young officer one of the assay bags of cocaine. The young officer studied it with amazement for some moments.

‘We haven’t seen real sugar for months’, he said in a tone of wonder.

‘You really should telephone and report that we are here’, Kelso said. ‘We are expected before it gets dark’.

When the young officer returned he was much more helpful. Yes indeed, a lorry of sugar was expected, and they were to proceed at once with it to the prison. But damage in the town had been extensive. The officer would detail two Militia troopers to escort them there. The Dunkeld Road was blocked and impassable, but a track had been bulldozed through to the North Inch. From the south end of the Inch, they could follow the river and then head for the rail station. Then they could cut across the the South Inch for the prison.

‘Make good use of it!’, Kelly said.

‘We certainly will!’, the young officer said: and waved them forwards.

A Militia trooper stood on each running board, and they drove the lorry round the checkpoint. From the Crieff road junction, the Dunkeld road was impassable with rubble. One of the troopers said that there had been savage hand-to-hand fighting in the street with some of the Fife miners. But when the snow had stopped, they brought in an aircraft which machine-gunned their positions and then bombed them without mercy. The few survivors had been shot out of hand. Labour-parties were at work in the ruins; again, they were bare-headed and bare-foot.

The moved slowly over the bull-dozed track to the north Inch. The golf-course was an armed camp. Military engineers with heavy-equipment were working at the bank of the Tay. One of the troopers said they were building a runway for light aircraft with conscript labour. A battery of anti-aircraft guns defended the site. Fifty armoured-cars were parked in ranks under camouflage netting. A burned-out aircraft lay smashed on a green: the miners had captured a heavy machine-gun and brought the plane down, according to one of the Militia lads on the lorry.

At the bottom of the Inch, the Perth bridge was very heavily fortified. There was more damage to the buildings to the south of the bridge - either bombing or artillery, it was not possible to say. At the Queen's bridge, a small group of prisoners was being marched out of the town centre under heavy guard. Not more than two dozen of them. Most of them seemed to be wounded.

Kelly said, 'Where are they going?'

One of the troopers shrugged. He said, 'A burial party'. The other trooper leered into the open window of the lorry and laughed.

The town seemed to be empty of people. One of the troopers said that most of the inhabitants had fled when the Protectorate forces had attacked and re-taken the town from the insurgents. For those that had remained, the casualty-rate had been very high. The 23-hour curfew kept the rest in their houses.

'It's shoot on sight', a trooper said. 'For four days now. They must be very hungry'.

In the near distance, engineers with a heavy crane were working on the destroyed rail-bridge at the north end of Moncrieffe island. With the rail-link reopened, they would be able to move heavy armour by train for the coming assault on Dundee. South of

the bridge, Tay street was a mountain of rubble and completely impassable.

They turned right, and drove through the centre. Curfew patrols were picking their way through the ruins, sometimes taking arrested people from doorways. It was getting dark, but there was no light to be seen anywhere in the town.

‘Why not?’

‘Lights forbidden during curfew’, one of the troopers said. ‘And anyway there is no electricity. The partisans smashed the supply and there is no need for us to put it back. Once we are finished here, the town is going to be flattened. As a reprisal. That’s what we’ve been told anyway’.

Bodies were lying on the pavements as they approached the station. It too had been the scene of heavy fighting. The roof had fallen in and a wrecked steam locomotive lay on its side right inside the building. But the line was open north and south, and a military train was disgorging its complement of assault troops. On the South Inch, along the length of the Edinburgh road, were barbed wire compounds, entirely open to the elements. A trooper said there were seven of them. One for Daniels and one for Fifth Monarchists: they had to be kept apart, for they would tear each other to pieces otherwise. Then a third and a fourth for some of the nationalists who had come up from Stirling as volunteers to defend Perth. There was a fifth compound for those of the Dundee insurgents who had been captured during the fighting on the east and west banks of the Tay during the re-occupation. The sixth compound was for prisoners who had been processed and were under sentence of death. They were shot in batches at dusk and at dawn, and the bodies thrown into the Tay. And then the seventh, for partisan children.

A trooper volunteered, 'Perth was easy. You should have seen what we did in Maidstone!'

The headlights of the lorry fingered their way across one of the compounds. A dense pack of children was seen to be standing inside it, crushed against the wire. Then the headlights swung right, and a line of gibbets came into view. A body was hanging on each, grotesquely lit by the bright yellow light.

'Where did all the children come from?', Kelly asked in wonder.

'From here', a trooper said. 'We hold all local children on a hostage basis during any emergency. And of course we sweep the countryside for partisan children. They are the worst of the lot, far more dangerous than adult partisans. They can appear from nowhere and disappear in a flash'.

In the cities the partisan children lived in basement ruins and sewers, in gangs. They specialised in picking-off vulnerable units of Militia and Paramilitary men. And drug-dealing and prostitution. There had been terrible outrages in places. But the country children were much worse, especially in the north where they lived in caves and huts in the mountains. Absolute savages, they even took-on adult bands of Daniels and other rebels. The north of Perthshire teemed with them, and the ones in the northern mountains were said to be even worse.

'Here is the prison'.

The prison had been badly damaged in the fighting for the town, but a diesel generator was beating softly away somewhere close, and dim lights could be seen across the buildings. At the gatehouse it was clear that they were expected, for the lorry was at once waved through into the courtyard. When they stopped the

engine a volley of rifle-fire was heard, very close at hand. They were taken to what passed for the administration block, and shown into an office of some luxury on the first floor. An orderly offered them tea or coffee and added that it was real stuff in either case. Or there was top-quality whisky from one of the nearby distilleries, if they would prefer?

The orderly said, 'Mr. MacGuffin will be with you shortly': and went away.

Then there was the sound of footsteps in the distance; doors opened and closed; there was a hideous animal shriek from deep within the bowels of the building; and another volley of rifle-fire, perhaps from the courtyard immediately below.

Then the door opened, and a familiar voice said ever so warmly, 'Hello sir, hello miss! For a time I didn't expect to see either of you again!'

Kelso saw the bow tie and the thin moustache first, and remembered the Three Cats under the railway arches in Gorgie. Des was wearing a dinner-suit. It looked like the same one.

'Hello Des', Kelso said.

Kelly said, 'Hello, Des'.

Kelso said, 'You must have very powerful friends, Des'.

'Business, sir, you can't let politics get in the way of business, can you?'

'How do you buy them, Des?', Kelso asked.

Des said in a tone of great reason, 'Anybody can be bought, sir. It's just a matter of finding the right price'.

'But how, Des?', Kelso asked again.

‘Easy, sir. You give me cocaine, I give you information. I get your information from them, and they get your cocaine from me. Or whatever else it is that they want’.

Kelso stood at the window of the office, looking down into the courtyard.

He said, ‘They are shooting prisoners, Des’.

‘They always shoot them at this time of night, sir. There isn’t room for all of them, there are so many now’.

Kelly said, ‘And can you give us what we want, Des?’

Des said, ‘Can you give me the cocaine, miss?’

Kelso said, ‘We have forty cases for you, Des’.

Kelly said, ‘It’s a ton again, Des’.

‘That’s very good news indeed, miss’.

Kelly said, ‘It’s because of the trouble last time, Des. Call it goodwill’.

‘Just the sort of thing I would do myself, miss’, Des said, ‘were our circumstances to be reversed’.

Kelso said, ‘We can’t stay long, Des’.

Des said the young ladies from the club were asking for the gentleman, and hoped to see him again. Prospects for business were good, and would be even better once the country had been returned to stable government.

Des said, ‘I hope to be able to announce a major acquisition shortly, sir. In the hospitality industry’.

Kelso said again that they did not have much time. Des said smoothly that the consignment was being transferred to a place of safe-keeping, and it would not take long.

‘Mick’s down in the basement, sir, dealing with it as we speak’.

Soon, an orderly came and had a private word with Des. Des look very relieved. The orderly was sent away at once.

Des said, 'Everything is in order, I am pleased to tell you. We can do business now'.

'How do you know it's all there, Des?'

'We weighed it, sir, same as usual'.

'Why don't you open them, Des?'

'The customer always prefers sealed packaging, sir. Whatever they are buying. They pay a premium, of course. And it's much safer for me that way too'.

'Would you like to try the stuff, Des?'

Des looked expectantly at Kelly and she handed to him the remaining assay bag.

Des said, 'There should be two of these'.

'We had to hand one over to get into Perth, Des'.

With immense expertise, Des broke apart the package and unrolled three lines of the most generous muscularity. He politely invited his guests to indulge the prospect of a personalised assessment. When they declined, he bent to the task with a style of the very deepest ease. He breathed very deeply. And then, in the cause of additional assay, Mr. MacGuffin's powdered moustache swept again across the table-top. He breathed even more deeply than before.

After a moment or two he was able to announce, 'The best of stuff, sir, the very best of stuff. Of course, I don't touch it myself. Except for testing. But I think this calls for a celebration. I have always wanted a hotel. Now I should be able to get the North British'.

'Perhaps you should give us a receipt, Des'.

And that was not a problem, for Des had already prepared a typewritten receipt for goods delivered. With a flourish he produced a fountain pen, and signed his name boldly below: Desmond MacGuffin.

‘This says it is for half a ton of sugar, Des’.

‘Indeed it does, sir’.

‘But it’s not sugar, Des, it’s cocaine’.

‘That’s to miss the point, sir’.

Kelly said, ‘And it’s a ton, Des, not half a ton’.

‘I don’t think you are in any position to argue, miss’, Des said. ‘I could turn you over to the Militia as smugglers and agents of the Americans. You would be shot tonight. Of course I wouldn’t do that sort of thing’.

‘I just don’t understand’, Kelso said.

‘I can see that, sir’, Des said. ‘I thought you might have worked it out by now. The deal was three tons of cocaine for the king, queen and the two children. That debt will be honoured’.

Kelly said, ‘But we have sent four tons, Des’.

‘That’s right, miss’, Des said. ‘But I am entitled to a cut, don’t you think? Fair exchange is no robbery. So I took half a ton from the last run before the authorities got there, and I will take half a ton from this run in the same way. That still leaves three tons for everyone else. I make a profit on both sides of the deal but everyone is still happy’.

‘That’s theft, Des’, Kelso said.

‘If I may say so, sir, theft is rather a harsh word in the circumstances’.

Kelly said, ‘What if you get caught, Des?’

‘All business is about calculating risk’, Des said, ‘and reducing exposure to that risk. The seals are unbroken, so the worst I could be prosecuted for is illegal trading in sugar. Given the trouble I could cause, I don’t think the authorities would bother’.

Kelly said, ‘Or you could buy them off, Des’.

‘That’s true, miss’, Des said smoothly, ‘but I would prefer to outwit them, as usual’.

Kelly said, ‘But what if word gets out, Des, that you have stolen a ton of cocaine?’

‘I will sue anyone who repeats that sort of calumny, miss, for damage to my business reputation, for defamation of my personal character’.

‘But it’s true, Des’.

‘Not if it’s defamatory, miss. That’s the law’.

In the silence that followed, more shooting could be heard from the courtyard.

‘Of course, any damages will go to a charity of my choice’, Des announced, as smoothly as ever.

Once again Des nipped a nostril, addressed the third line of table top assay, swept his powdered moustache across it, and breathed very deeply indeed.

‘It could be a long night’, he said, ‘and I want to keep my wits about me’.

Kelso said, ‘Give us the king, Des, and his family, and let us out of here now’.

Des looked surprised. ‘We don’t have them here, sir. We never promised to have them here. And we never promised to have them alive. But I can tell you where they are supposed to be. If they are all still alive’.

Kelly said, 'The deal, Des, the deal. You get what you want, we get what we want'.

Des said with great composure that a deal was a deal.

'My word is my bond, miss'.

Kelso said, 'So where are they, Des?'

Des said, 'You'll need a map, sir. I have arranged transport, with some partisans to look after you. We don't have room for them here anyway. It's a shame to shoot children. But you will have to hurry. Your transport and partisans are ready for you in the courtyard'.

'Are they still alive, Des? Where are they being kept?'

Des stood at the door of the office. He smiled above the thin, entrepreneurial moustache and said, 'I didn't get much schooling sir, not like you and the miss. But I know my history, sir. You will have to be quick'.

'Where is the king, Des?'

'There are maps in the transport, sir. That'll take you to him. But be quick. They say Westminster Hall is all ready, they even have an axeman with a hood standing by. Only if there is a guilty verdict, of course'.

Des adjusted his bow tie, and dusted his moustache.

Kelso said, 'Just one question, Des. How do you work it? What happens with the stuff?'

'There really isn't time to tell you that, sir', Des said with a smile. 'Your transport is waiting and you better go at once'.

Once more, Des smiled: a rich, honest smile of blessing and good fortune.

Kelso said, 'What if the Americans complain about their cocaine being stolen, Des?'

‘But they won’t’, Des said. ‘The American government has the highest respect for international law and as a consequence would never admit to drug-dealing on an industrial scale’.

And then Des added, ‘The very best of luck, sir. And to you too, miss. If you ever come to Edinburgh again, look in at the North British. We can assure you of a very warm welcome indeed’.

‘You won’t cheat us, Des?’

‘My word is my bond, sir’.

And with that, Des led Kelso and Kelly out to the courtyard of the prison.