

Thirty-two.

By now, it was close to midnight. The snow had stopped falling in Perth. In the courtyard of the prison, six armoured cars in Militia winter colours were drawn up. They were heavy-duty vehicles, strapped with shovels and pickaxes, crowbars, auxiliary winches, steel-hawser tow-ropes and diesel-drums. All were sturdy six-wheelers, with winter tyres. And they were fuelled and ready to go.

Thirty partisans had been selected and provided for the trip: five to each armoured car. Kelly and Des and Kelso watched them assemble. Somewhere in the bowels of the building, there was more shooting.

Des said, 'We can't look after them all, sir. And we have our orders'.

'What is happening, Des?', Kelso asked.

'Order has been restored, sir. The forces of law have retaken London. The radio is back and the telephone system. There's still a lot of clearing up to do, of course. Especially in country areas. But you should get through'.

'Where are they, Des?'

'I have made enquiries, sir. They were being held near Arran. On Holy Isle. But with all the trouble in recent days, they have been moved. They are being kept now at a place called Bridge of Orchy. A convoy took them up'.

'A pity about the king', Kelso said, 'that was the one we really wanted'.

'Nobody can have him now sir, now that he's dead. But you can still have the rest of them'.

The partisans were strikingly young. They had been held in the prison for months. Most had belonged to one or other of the bands which had roamed the country when their parents had been arrested.

Des said, 'These are the best of the best for your purposes, sir. They were all in the high-security camp at Cultybraggan near Comrie. But they burned it down, massacred the guards and took to the hills. If they are caught again, they will get no mercy'.

The children all looked extremely tough; very tough indeed.

'What about weapons, Des?'

'In the cars, sir. We don't want them to get into the wrong hands just yet. They are very dangerous, you know, these children'.

'Where is Bridge of Orchy?'

'There are maps in the cars, sir. And your partisans will know the way, they all know the country backwards. That is why it took such a long time to catch them'.

'And food, Des?'

'We have already prepared a buffet supper for everyone, sir. You can't expect to travel far on a night like this without food'.

And indeed the entrepreneur was as good as his word. In one of the staff offices, hot food was served to the party: coffee, hot soup, bread from the prison kitchens. Des watched it all with a professional eye.

He said, 'Everyone is entitled to ambition, sir. I want to expand from the night-club business. Buy a hotel as soon as I can. Once order is fully restored, of course. You just can't trust the drugs business any more'.

The children seemed to be ravenously hungry but the kitchen sent trays of boiled potatoes and a cauldron of stew in which strange sweetmeats bobbed at the bare point of buoyancy.

‘What is it, Des?’

‘Sheeps’ heads, sir. Very nourishing. We had to requisition them in the country yesterday. All the farmers have taken to the hills. We had some problems finding any animals at all’.

Des rapped a table with a headmaster’s benign authority. There was a respectful silence from the children, almost at once. Des said that they were to be released from custody for a special mission. He was sorry if they thought they had been mis-treated in the prison, but times were difficult and it was not his responsibility. They were to have six armoured cars, stocked with small arms. They were to take the gentleman and the lady to the north. The gentleman and the lady had to find some people. When they had found them, they would take them away. Then everyone could do as they liked.

Des said, ‘Yes, Maxine?’

A girl had raised a hand, just as if she were back in school. Maybe sixteen or so, it was hard to say. She wore a pair of sheepskin boots, Militia winter combat issue.

‘Is it a trick, Des’.

Des assured the girl that it was not a trick.

Kelso said, ‘What is she here for, Des?’

‘One of the very worst, sir. Murder, extortion, train-robbing, kidnapping. She is a very lucky girl. She was rostered for execution tomorrow’.

A Paramilitary trooper had a word with Des. The children watched the trooper with murderous hatred. Then Des had a word with Kelso.

'They have moved them again, sir. Partisans attacked at Bridge of Orchy. The prisoners were taken north by train'.

Kelly said, 'Where to, Des?'

'Somewhere called Inverlair, miss'.

'Will that make it more difficult for us, Des?'

'I am afraid it will make it a great deal more difficult for you, miss, much more difficult'.

'Where is Inverlair, Des?'

'Somewhere near a station called Tulloch. Perhaps the children will know where it is'.

Kelso said. 'Look after yourself, Des'.

Des said, 'Don't worry about me, sir, people like me always survive. Good luck, sir'.

'Good luck, Des', Kelly said.

'Best of luck, miss', Des said.

Then they left. Des raised an arm in goodbye, and the convoy moved out from the prison. There was a final burst of shooting from somewhere on the other side of the building, and then the cars were driving slowly through the ruins of Perth. On the outskirts of the town, they halted. By some obscure process of natural selection, Maxine had assumed command of her partisans. A younger boy appeared to be second in command. In the back of the lead car, someone lit an oil lamp. Maps of the countryside were studied.

Maxine said, 'Where are we going, sir?'

'Near somewhere called Tulloch', Kelso said. 'It's a railway station'.

‘I know that, sir’, Maxine said coolly. ‘But how are we going to get there?’

A handful of the young partisans crowded round as they studied the map. There were two routes. One north by Pitlochry and Laggan, and then west and into the mouth of glen Spean. But there would be trouble with snow, perhaps also with Daniels or Militia posts. And it was a very long way, given the short time available to them. The second, by Glencoe and Fort William, was even longer. And the road was very likely to be impassable with snow, very likely indeed.

‘Let me see the map, sir’, Maxine asked.

The girl studied the map in complete silence and total stillness. She was wearing a standard-issue watch of the sort issued to senior Militia officers.

Without looking up, she said, ‘I killed him, sir. A clean head shot. He was the first one of them I killed, that’s why I took his watch’.

The girl studied the map for five whole minutes in the breathless stillness. Then she said that she had a better idea. Her finger stabbed at the map.

‘This is a better way, sir. Aberfeldy and Bridge of Gaur. Then we are on the railway. It is much faster and we won’t meet Militia forces over there. It’s one of their hunting preserves’.

‘And what then?’, Kelso asked.

‘Easy’, the girl said. ‘We can steal a train if there is one. Otherwise, we can force-march it. Most of us have done it before. That’s the way we used to move across country: by night on the railway lines. It’s much safer than the roads’.

Then they drove on. At first it was very dark, and no light was to be seen anywhere in the landscape. But at length a moon rose and bathed the countryside in a pale yellow light. There was a great deal of snow on either side of the road, but the road itself was clear. One of the young partisans said that it had been cleared the previous afternoon by a snowplough and a battalion of forced-labour conscripts from somewhere in England. Once, a flight of many aircraft was heard above - heavy planes by the sound of them - but nothing was seen. At Dunkeld, they left the line of the Tay and swung west. The snow on this back road was much worse, and the convoy made slow progress for the rest of the night. Twice, cars had to be harnessed to the lead car and hauled from drifts with steel cables.

But by daybreak there had still been no sign of opposition, and the snow had cleared a little. They came to a village but it was empty: one of the children said there had been a pitched battle a week earlier between one of the partisan gangs in north Perthshire and a unit of Paramilitaries. Many of the houses were in ruins, without roofs or windows. A crashed aircraft blocked the road, and they took some time to work their way round it. The children were cheered by this sight, and discussed the ways known to them of bringing down such planes.

They took the road to Weem and Keltneyburn and in the middle of the day stopped to eat, in the shelter of a copse of trees. One of the cars had been supplied with insulated catering drums, stamped HM Prison, Perth. Most of the children, ravenous again, ate with gusto, while the remainder stood guard. Then a spotter plane was heard approaching, very low by the sound of its engines.

It came into sight from the east, and continued on its course without any alteration whatsoever. Perhaps it had seen nothing.

At Tummel Bridge they turned west.

'This is where the Jacobite infantry came in 1746', Maxine said with authority.

One of the other children said, 'How do you know that?'

'School', the girl said sharply, 'I went to school once, you know'.

For a time the sun shone and then it disappeared. The sky began to grow thick with snow-clouds. Maxine said there were other partisans in the area: she did not say how she knew this, for there was no sign of life anywhere. Kelso asked her how she had come to join the partisans, but the girl looked away and would not answer.

She said, 'Do you know what vengeance is, sir?'

'What was it like in Perth?'

But again she would not answer. Instead she said, 'There is a roadblock ahead of us sir. It would be best to stop. In case they are partisans and think we are Militia people'.

'What if they are Militia?'

'It will give you a chance to get away, sir. Don't worry about us'.

The convoy stopped and Maxine dismounted from the lead car. She was carrying a short assault rifle on a sling and for a moment seemed invincible. She strode forward to the roadblock and as if by miracle figures materialised from the nearby heather. The girl seemed perfectly at ease with the situation. She turned and waved an arm at the convoy. Then it was up at the block, and a dozen adult partisans surrounded the cars.

Maxine was saying, 'We can leave you one of our cars. All six, if you want to wait till tonight. We are taking the railway route'.

The leader of the group was a man in his forties. He seemed half-starved and was desperate for news of the rising.

'We lost our radio', he said. 'They tracked us by spotter plane and then bombed us. We lost a dozen of our boys too'.

They had two injured men in a nearby ruin. But no fire; it was too dangerous to show smoke in the daylight.

Kelso said, 'We have a medicine chest in one of the cars. Maybe morphine'.

Maxine said, 'Where are you going next?'

The leader seemed not to know. The entire Grampians were in the hands of rebels but a counter-attack was already under way in the north east.

He said, 'We must find safe quarters for this weather. Up here we will freeze if it goes cold again. And it will any time now'.

Kelso said, 'We're dumping these cars at the end of the road. There is enough fuel to take you out. That's the best we can do'.

Again, they drove onwards. Herds of deer swarmed on either side of the road but there was no sign of human existence in the entire landscape. Kinloch Rannoch was empty of life, and a burned-out bus lay on its roof in front of the hotel. To their left, the loch was frozen solid: on its surface, more deer strolled. Another spotter plane was heard. Then it came over the horizon, but it turned sharply at the edge of visibility and soon disappeared again.

Maxine said, 'We will have to watch for the wolves, sir. They are dangerous for the small children in cold weather'.

'Wolves?'

‘Yes, sir. They put them in all the hunting preserves in the north. We don’t need to be afraid of them, but the youngsters do’.

Night was beginning to fall. Very slowly, the convoy worked its way west. It was near to the end of the road now. There was no moon yet. And then, the end of the first part of their journey: the railhead on the moor. The station was deserted, but intact. They found the signalman’s house: it had been ransacked by partisans, and more had clearly taken refuge in the signal box. But otherwise, the property was undamaged.

‘Will there be a train tonight?’, Kelso asked.

Maxine said, ‘Not south now. Maybe north. If there is, we will take it. Otherwise, it will take us all night to walk to Inverlair’.

‘There is some food left’, Kelly said.

‘That’s a good idea’, the girl said. ‘We better share it out among the younger ones. It could be a very long and cold walk if there is no train’.

Some of the young partisans made a fire in the abandoned railway cottage: someone warned about the danger of light, but Maxine said that two boys had been posted back down the track as watchers. No government forces could approach the station without warning; and none would come across the moor in the snow. And if any came up the line by rail - well, they would hear them coming, and be ready for them.

Kelso said, ‘It must be twenty miles. We better get ready to go if we want to be there by daybreak’.

One of the youngsters had stripped a firearm and was lovingly assembling it by the light of the fire. The boy said four hours’ hard walking would take them to Inverlair. Maxine said they would leave the younger children at the station.

‘If you have to get out of here’, she told them, ‘head for the Long Shed Cutting and then come back here if it is safe’.

She told them that they should stay there for two days: if she was not back from Inverlair within that time, they should scatter. The party sat round the fire in silence for an hour. Away from the fire, it seemed very cold.

Maxine spoke for everyone. She said, ‘Do you think they will still be there, sir?’

Kelso said he did not know. And he said that he did not think a train would come now. Then they began to walk, just fifteen of them, heavily armed, in two files, one on either side of the track. They walked in complete silence for an hour, and then the moon rose. At this, walking became easier. Deer, quite unafraid, watched them from very close at hand. For what seemed an eternity, a wolf howled somewhere on the moor.

‘Have you heard wolves before, sir?’, Maxine asked.

Kelso said, ‘A long time ago’.

‘You never forget the sound, sir’.

‘No, not at night’.

Then a steep incline began, in a cutting through rock. Above the cutting snow-walls in rough wood held back the drifts. Kelso was first to hear the train: a locomotive somewhere in the distance sounding a steam whistle to clear deer of the line - though it was not clear how far off the train was. In absolute silence the party froze and listened. Someone put an ear to a rail and cursed at the coldness of it. But there was a train on the line, no doubt about it. Maxine cried an order, and the party scattered.

‘Up on the edge of the cutting’, she said. ‘If it is a Militia passenger train, we will have to fight for it, but a goods train will be undefended’.

The train by slow degrees began to come nearer to their hiding places on either side of the cutting. It was a northbound train, still blowing its steam whistle. At times the locomotive could be heard quite clearly, and then the sound disappeared on the moor. It seemed to be making very slow progress. Then they could hear it enter into the long incline, and slow some more.

‘Jump when you’re told’, Maxine ordered, ‘jump for the tender. And don’t shoot the driver, we don’t know how to drive the steam ones yet’.

The train was going very slowly now. Then it came into view. A single locomotive was hauling a string of goods trucks. It had slowed to a crawl, making heavy work of the incline. Then, at last, it came abreast of the waiting partisans.

‘Now’, Kelso cried, and leapt for the tender. He slammed into the half-empty waggon, and Maxine landed like a cat beside him. Kelly and the remainder of the children leapt for the goods trucks, and began at once to swarm forward. Then they came over the leading edge of the tender, and were on the footplate. The driver was peering forward down the track, and the fireman was bent to his shovel. Maxine smashed her assault rifle over the fireman’s head, and he fell among his coal. Then the driver turned and saw that he was no longer in command of the train.

He said, ‘You didn’t need to hit him, Maxine’.

The girl said to Kelso with pride, ‘This is what we used to do. Rob the trains. We were very good at it’.

As if to emphasise the point, the tender was suddenly swarming with a dozen children, peering down into the fiery light of the footplate.

The driver said, 'I wouldn't stay here too long. There is an armoured Militia train coming up in another hour'.

'We will tell you when we want to get off', Kelso said, 'it won't be long now'.

For a time it seemed as if the train would never get to the summit of that long incline; but then the moor became flat, and the train picked up speed. The fireman recovered, got to his feet, and began to heft coal into the furnace without a word.

Maxine said, 'Did everyone make it?'

One of the children said that just twelve had got aboard. Three of the youngsters had fallen. Perhaps they might make it back to the others. Perhaps not. Train robbing had always been dangerous.

The moor stretched into the moonlight, deep in snow. Huge herds of deer watched them, their eyes glittering in the light. The footplate threw a dark red glow, which seemed to dance across the snow. Then the long level of the summit gave way to a down incline, and the wheels began to rattle faster on the rails. To the left, far below, a lake shimmered. Gradually it seemed to get closer, as the line fell down towards it. Then it terminated in a concrete dam, and a thin river trickled away from it.

Kelso said, 'We are leaving you now. Slow your train right down'.

The driver said, 'There is a Militia building in the trees. If they hear the train stop they will want to know why'.

‘Don’t stop’, Kelso said. ‘Just slow it’. And then they jumped, all of them, into deep snow. Nobody was injured, and the train rattled off into the distance.

They retraced their route back to the dam and watched carefully for a sign of any guard post. But there was none, and in slow single file they crossed its rim, into the thick trees beyond.

Again, Maxine spoke for all of them. ‘Do you think there will be anybody here, sir?’

Kelso said. ‘If there are Militia here, we will have to kill them. All of them. Then we go into the house and find the people we are looking for’.

Who are they?’, Maxine asked.

‘An English woman’, Kelso said, ‘and her two daughters. They’re not much older than you’.

‘Are they on our side?’

They discovered a track into the trees, and followed it for a time. Then, from a low rise in the land, they saw the house in a clearing ahead. It was in absolute darkness. They spread out into the trees and moved on the building. Then the edge of the clearing. Still absolute silence, absolute darkness. Kelso moved towards the house, while the young partisans took the flanks. Maxine joined him from the darkness.

She said, ‘What do you think, sir?’

Kelso said, ‘I don’t think there is anybody here’.

A child came running. There were bodies at the back of the building. In Militia uniform. Their throats had been cut, and some had had their ears removed. And their boots, of course.

Maxine said, ‘Daniels, sir. They always go for the ears’.

Inside the house the silence was greater than ever. The darkness was total. The building was clearly very empty. And then Maxine said, 'It's not'.

They listened for what seemed an age. Kelso said, 'I hear nothing'.

Maxine breathed, 'Is there a cellar below? I heard a noise'.

And then they found the cellar, in absolute darkness. A trapdoor under the dining room led to it. There was a dreadful silence, and then a voice began to sob in the darkness. There were steps down into the darkness of the cellar. The prisoners were brought at once. There was indeed an English woman and two girls who might have been her daughters. They were all in a state of severe shock.

The woman wanted to know if they were they going to be shot at once. They had heard shooting earlier, during a partisan attack. That was when they had been put in the cellar. Then there had been more shooting, and then silence.

One of the Maxine's partisans found an oil lamp in the dining room, a gracious creature of a thing with a tall and elegant neck. They lit it, and a warm glow suffused the generous room.

Maxine said, 'It will be daylight soon. What do we do now?'

Kelso said, 'We get them out. But your job is finished'.

'We will come with you', the girl said. 'We can't go back now'.

One of the prisoners looked at the children, aghast. A voice said, 'Who on earth are these children?'

Kelso ignored this. He said to Maxine, 'We have to get them to a pick-up on the coast. We might be too late already'.

Maxine said, 'We must hurry, sir. We are being followed. I always know when I am being followed and I have never been wrong'.

'Nobody knows we are here', Kelso said.

Maxine said, 'They will by now, sir. We will need transport or they will catch us here'.

'It's just not possible', Kelso said.

Suddenly, a telephone in the corner of the room began to ring. It went on and on for what seemed an age. Finally, Kelly picked up the handset.

A voice said, very civilly, 'My name is Charlie Marr. Let me speak at once to Kelso Lamont'.

Kelso signalled that she should replace the phone. When she did so, the silence seemed more dreadful, more ominous than ever.

'I told you', Maxine said, 'I am never wrong about being followed': and she rushed outside shouting orders as she went.

They could hear Maxine outside, calling to her partisans. Some were to sabotage the railway line, and stop or derail the Militia armoured train which was on its way. Then some of the younger children were asking if they would be coming with her or would they stay and shoot-up the Militia in the dark, once their train had been brought to a halt? And then Maxine was shouting something about the truck, her partisans had found a truck, and they should get it started at once.

Kelso said to the prisoners, 'It is extremely cold and we have a long way to go. But we must go now. Get out and get in the truck now'.

At first, the women refused to go. They were convinced it was another Militia plan to murder them. That is why they had been put

in the cellar. They were going to be murdered there. Like the poor Tsar and his family - that is what the Militia had told them. If the partisans had not attacked, they would have been shot. They had survived by a matter of minutes. So they might as well be shot where they were, rather than be herded out into the snow and shot down.

Kelly comforted the mother and the girls. She said she had come to rescue them from the Militia, and to take them away to a place where they would be safe. The Americans were going to take them away from the Protectorate and its prisons; but time was short, and soon the Militia would be in pursuit of them all again. That was why they had to go at once.

The daughters began to wail and the mother said, 'If you do not take the king, we will not leave. We will wait till they return and shoot us all'.

'King?', Kelso said, 'the king is dead'.

'He's not, you know', a stuttering voice said from the gloom: and in the light of the gracious oil-lamp the stooped and elderly figure of George VI in rags made its slow way from the cellar-entrance beside them.