

Chapter Three

District Management and War

About this time the Old Man sent for me.

'Fiennes' he said 'there's a job going as Assistant District Superintendent at Burntisland. Do you want to run for it?'

'Yes' said I.

'Well I'm not going to recommend you'.

'Sir, why?' The 'sir' half despondent, half indignant. I thought I was doing all right for the Old Man. In my simple error I supposed that instead of his own qualities the things Bill and I had done on the Great Eastern had something to do with his having wiped B.-W.'s eye for Divisional General Manager.

'You've started a lot of things: good things some of them. You're doing all right but you had better stop and finish them'.

For the first time in my life—and I suppose this is where the habit began, I took issue with my boss.

'I must get on' I said. 'How am I to send my children to Winchester if not?'

The Old Man laughed fatly. 'Would you like to go and see Mr. Bell? You won't get much change'.

So I went and as predicted got none. Bell had a tiny little frame, a fact that he always concealed behind his desk, but his head and frosty eyes were formidable. Both were visible above the blotter. The latter fixed me with a basilisk look. 'What is wr-r-rong with Watson's Academy?' Presumably the old stinker had been there. And I didn't know what was wrong with it except that it had produced the old stinker. It was not the moment to say so. I went away chastised with whips but resolved that the kids should get to Winchester; and they did.

Nevertheless within six months, in August 1939, I was Assistant District Superintendent at Edinburgh in succession to Harry Pallant: and pretty uncomfortable too. I shared a room with David Lamb who was Chief Clerk. David had always oppressed

me with his vast range of knowledge. He did so again quite unconsciously. I hadn't arrived then at the philosophy of the work-shy that those who know everything do nothing.

Slowly at that time the English were infiltrating Scotland, not in battalions but as single spies. The Scots were nice enough about it but Stemp 'the Major' had oppressed them vastly a few years before; and the current Assistant Superintendent and Oppressor-in-Chief, H. G. Sayers, was chastising them with scorpions. To the Scots as English I was a would-be oppressor, to Sayers as English and wished on him, I was a clear candidate for a scorpion.

For murder you need motive which Sayers had and opportunity which he also had at once. I found myself District Air Raid Precautions Officer. War was less than a month away. District Office and a disused tunnel in Scotland Street were full of gas masks, capes, and steel helmets. Little had been done about shelters, lighting or training. The whole enterprise was in the hands of one Class V clerk. Scotland was going to war. Reluctantly I tore into this shambles. We spent till midnight every night with lists of staff, labelling equipment and sending it out to stations, interrupted only by the need to carry out a Sayers' instruction to inspect the sleeping car trains three times a week. Within a few days we had created a shambles of our own. The staff office lists were many months out of date. As fast as we sent the stuff out it came back with demands for different things. Sayers himself got a cape, cut for a midget. He sent for me. He wiped the floor with me. At that moment no cape would have fitted him. He seemed seven feet high and six feet wide. From thenceforward nothing I could do was right.

War broke out. I couldn't listen to Neville Chamberlain. We were evacuating a train load of expectant mothers. At 11.4 the sirens began to wail. We got the near-Mums out of the train. We shepherded them from the light of day into Scotland Street Tunnel, where they stood in apprehensive groups wondering what was going to happen to them externally and internally. I wondered too. Some of them began to be only too sure. The internal problem was aggravated by the unfinished (like all else) lavatory doors which banged in the wind a little way up the tunnel and sounded like gunfire overhead. The all-clear blew in a little while. We poured out, hustled them into the train regardless of their pains and blew the whistle. Never have I been so glad to see a tail lamp.

We settled down to the phoney war. We straightened out the A.R.P. shambles, got the black-out effective, obeyed an order from