

Outline

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THE YELLOWCAKE PIRATE

by Ken Follett

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A technical note

Uranium has to go through two processes before it can be used to make atom bombs. (i) It must undergo fission in an atomic pile, eg a nuclear power station. (ii) The 'spent' fuel from the reactor must be reprocessed and the explosive by-product, plutonium, extracted.

Uranium can be bought on the open market, although suppliers are few and sales are strictly monitored by international agencies. Furthermore, many of the 'non-nuclear' nations have atomic power stations, and can therefore carry out process (i). In particular, Israel has a reactor at Dimona in the Negev Desert. The technology of reprocessing is straightforward for anyone who has a reactor; and the construction of an atom bomb - the actual clockwork of the thing, so to speak - is no more complex than that of any bomb.

However, none of the non-nuclear nations is allowed to carry out process (ii), the extraction of plutonium. Uranium is always sold on condition the spent fuel is returned to the major powers for reprocessing.

The international agencies are able to police these agreements quite strictly; for, given the quantity of uranium fed into the reactor, it is possible to calculate precisely how much plutonium will be recovered from the spent fuel.

In this way the major powers have tried to limit the spread of nuclear weapons while at the same time giving other countries the benefits of nuclear power.

It follows that a minor power which wants atom bombs must first of all acquire a stockpile of uranium secretly.

THE YELLOWCAKE PIRATE

PROLOGUE It is 1947. Nat Dickstein, 22, is an undergraduate at Oxford University. An East End Jew, he was taken prisoner in Italy in 1944 and spent the rest of the war in concentration camps. He is friendly with David Rostov, a Russian graduate student who also saw some action in the war.

Dickstein is visited by a third veteran, Alan Cortone, whose life he saved in Italy. Cortone is an American of Sicilian extraction. The three go to a sherry party given by Dickstein's professor, Stephen Ashford.

Ashford, 45, is an Arabist, one of a breed of Englishmen who fell in love with the Middle East in the first half of this century and explored, exploited, and translated the region. Ashford has now married Eila, a beautiful Lebanese twenty years his junior, and settled down as Professor of Semitic Literature at Oxford. They have a daughter, Suza, 4.

Dickstein is in love with Eila but does nothing about it. He is also contemplating emigrating to Palestine. David Rostov encourages him to go. (In 1947 the USSR was pro-Israel.) Cortone tells Professor Ashford the story of how Dickstein saved his life. Dickstein goes into the garden, large and overgrown. There is a box hedge of peculiar shape: the acoustics enable one to overhear a conversation taking place around the corner. What Dickstein overhears is Yasif Hassan, a wealthy Palestinian undergraduate, having a lovers' quarrel with Eila.

ONE In 1960 a young Israeli agent in Cairo discovers that the Egyptians are building a nuclear reactor in the Western Desert. Before he can report to Tel Aviv he is captured, interrogated and killed. However, a double agent in Egyptian Intelligence passes on the news.

TWO There is a dispute in the Israeli Cabinet. The Hawks want atom bombs. The Doves raise two objections. (i) The effect might be to justify the Russians in ~~the~~ giving the bomb to the Arabs. (ii) Israel has no supply of uranium. The Doves prevail until Pierre Borg, the caféish Quebecois head of Mossad, reveals the news from Cairo. That answers objection (i). Borg also has the answer to (ii) ...

THREE In a kibbutz near the Syrian border we again meet Nat Dickstein, now 43, our central character. He dropped out of Oxford to go to Palestine, fought in the War of Independence, and joined Mossad, for whom he now works on Special Operations. He has been shaped by two traumas: his father's persecution by English Fascists in the 1930s, and his year in the concentration camps. His aggression, his mastery of all kinds of weapons, and his expertise in military tactics grow out of a secret fear that once again the world will turn on him as it did in 1937 and 1944. Israel is a private, as well as national, fortress. He is an uncompromising Zionist, but too bright to be a jingoist: he sees the world not in terms of Good Guys and Bad Guys but of My People and The Rest. Small, bespectacled and deceptively slender ("like a bundle of sticks in a bag" someone says) he is capable of sudden savage violence. He is an intelligent cynic

with a Lenny Bruce sense of humour and a deep-seated sexual block dating from the camps, where he was the subject of gruesome experiments. He has been nicknamed The Pirate ever since he arrived in Palestine aboard a boatload of stolen rifles. This kibbutz is his spiritual home, these people his only family.

Pierre Borg arrives and briefs him to steal a quantity of uranium in such a way that at first it will seem simply to have been lost. The idea is that the radiation authorities will be so embarrassed that at first they will hush the affair up. Later, when they realise the stuff was actually stolen, they will be compromised by their own cover-up. Later still, if and when the cover-up is exposed, the trail to Tel Aviv will have gone cold. Dickstein has his doubts - like the Doves in the Cabinet, he is uneasy about the contrast between Israel's liberal ideals and her actual politics - but of course he agrees to do the job.

Borg also prepares to put an agent into the Egyptian nuclear plant. This is a race: whoever is the first to put uranium into processing will be the first to have the Bomb.

FOUR Dickstein's first move is to penetrate the Brussels headquarters of Euratom, where track is kept of all radioactive materials in Western Europe. First by posing as a journalist, and later by subverting a permit clerk, Dickstein gains access to the files.

A Kremlin committee discusses the Egyptian reactor. The Egyptians, having begun the project without consulting their Soviet allies, are now asking for technical help. The Russians face a dilemma: they don't want the Arabs to have the Bomb, but if there is to be an Arab Bomb they want a Russian finger on the

button. So, reluctantly, they agree to help.

In Brussels Dickstein bumps into Yasif Hassan, the Oxford lover of Eila Ashford. Hassan's family is impoverished: their businesses were ruined by the 1948 war and their land was subsequently expropriated by the Israeli government. Hassan now works for the European branch of a Lebanese bank. He has lost his aristocratic demeanour along with his fortune. He does not reveal to Dickstein the depth of his bitterness. The bank job is a cover: he is with Egyptian Intelligence. Routinely, he reports to Cairo the sighting of an unexplained Israeli. To his surprise Cairo gets quite excited and orders him to put Dickstein under surveillance.

FIVE Dickstein visits a nuclear power station and takes the guided tour, noting the security set-up. He could steal uranium from here, but not without the theft being noticed immediately. He will consider stealing a consignment in transit. He spots his tail and loses it.

The KGB are getting Hassan's reports via Cairo, and panicking. The Pirate is known to be a top Israeli operative. What does Mossad want with nuclear reactors? Moscow and Cairo mount a joint operation to find out. To lead the team they choose a senior KGB man who was at Oxford with Dickstein and Hassan: David Rostov.

Rostov has risen to great heights in the Soviet apparatus by a combination of diligent Intelligence work and brilliant internal politicking. By contrast with Dickstein and Hassan, he has no burning personal motivation for what he does. Had he been born in Guildford instead of Smolensk he would have done equally well in Whitehall. He is no less ruthless for being a bureaucrat - indeed, his detachment is the more chilling.

SIX Dickstein returns to the Euratom files, now focussing his attention on shipments. He is beginning to hatch a scheme. One of the permits on file is for 200 tons of yellowcake (crude uranium ore) to be shipped from Antwerp to Genoa aboard the m.v. Coparelli. The owners of the uranium are F.A. Pedler, a small German industrial-chemicals manufacturing firm based in Wiesbaden. The uranium is going to Genoa for non-nuclear processing.

Dickstein plans to hijack the Coparelli at sea. At first he proposes to transfer the uranium to another ship, but this turns out to be somewhat chancey: a big storm could jeopardise the whole operation. Alternatively, he must simply sail the Coparelli to Israel with her cargo. But then the theft could hardly be kept secret. Or could it ... ?

Rostov's team goes to work. At first they consider the possibility that Mossad plans to blow up atomic reactors. Then Rostov says: Why was Dickstein in Brussels? What is there in Brussels that connects with power stations? Answer: Euratom.

In the Western Desert, Borg's agent arrives, under the cover of a security guard. He is appalled at how far advanced the whole project is.

SEVEN Dickstein has naturally made the connection between his meeting with Hassan and his tail at the power station. Trying to confirm his suspicion that Hassan is in the game, he visits Professor Ashford in Oxford. Dickstein is thunderstruck when the door is opened by a woman who appears to be Eila, not a day older than she was in 1947. In fact Eila is dead, and this is her daughter Suza, now 25. From Ashford's replies to his discreet

questions Dickstein concludes that Hassan is indeed in the game. Dickstein has, therefore, been blown, although perhaps not fatally. Through the Israeli Embassy he sends a message to Pierre Borg.

Rostov and Hassan interrogate Dickstein's Euratom contact. They conclude that Dickstein plans to steal uranium - but what uranium?

EIGHT Suza and Dickstein have dinner. He falls for her as surely as he fell for her mother. Still, he has lots of reasons for being ambivalent about her: she's half Arab; in Israel their children would be denied the all-important 'Jewish' classification; he does not know how much of his emotion is really directed at the memory of her mother; and anyway, after twenty years on ice he is pretty terrified of the whole idea of sex.

Suza. This is 1968, and she belongs to the LSD generation. She has her mother's startling beauty and her father's soft centre. She is warm, tender and perceptive. Initially fascinated by the fact that he loved her mother, she comes to love Dickstein for his great strength and his secret weakness. She does not intimidate him with rampant sexuality; but, once they are in bed, she says that there are no rules and no secrets: if you are frightened or disgusted or inflamed you can say so, and you must. And he does. All the guilt and horror of the camps come pouring out. Suza immediately and intuitively understands something nobody else ever knew: the reason those gruesome experiments froze Dickstein for so long was that he found they turned him on. Suza teaches him not to be ashamed.

Meanwhile Rostov's computer brain is at work. Trying to think like Dickstein, he decides that a visit to Professor

Ashford is on the cards. Hassan goes to Oxford and confirms that Dickstein is in England. Rostov puts a watch on the legals at the Israeli Embassy in the hope that one of them will contact Dickstein.

NINE Borg flies in to meet with Dickstein, and due to Dickstein's precautions the trail is not picked up by Rostov's pavement artists. Borg reports that Russian technicians have arrived at the reactor site in the Western Desert. They discuss Hassan, and decide that the operation must go on.

If Borg is a bastard, he's a clever bastard, and he senses the change in Dickstein. Suspicious, he puts Dickstein under surveillance. This reveals the liaison with Suza. Borg disapproves: in his view it is the tension within Dickstein that makes the man so fierce.

The tail is an Israeli Embassy legal, so of course he leads Rostov's pavement artists to Dickstein.

Dickstein makes inquiries at Lloyds about Coparelli. As he hoped, she is one of a series of identical vessels. One of her sister ships is the m.v. Stromberg. Dickstein will buy the Stromberg. Then, when he has hijacked the Coparelli, he will paint out her name, re-name her Stromberg, and sail what appears to be his own ship into Haifa.

TEN The conversations with Lloyds are bugged. By comparing those inquiries with the Euratom file, Rostov comes up with the name Coparelli. Now he knows what uranium Dickstein will steal. But when, where and how?

Dickstein goes to Buffalo to see Alan Cortone, now

known as Don Cortone. Dickstein needs a base from which to launch his hijack. Cortone supplies one in Sicily.

ELEVEN Rostov locates the Coparelli in Cardiff and puts a man aboard. Hassan announces he has to return to Cairo for interim debriefing.

Dickstein goes to Zurich and sets up two Liberian shipping companies. Company A buys a small ship, the Gil Hamilton, opens an office in Hamburg, begins to trade, and buys the Stromberg. Company B exists only on paper.

TWELVE The squirrels in Moscow Centre prove their worth.

They note the sale of Stromberg (routinely reported) and identify Company A as an Israeli front. Rostov tells them to locate the ship.

Dickstein goes to Wiesbaden. Acting as a buyer for the Israeli Army, he places a vast order for pesticides with F.A. Peßler, the owners of the uranium. They hesitate. They will have to turn the bulk of their manufacturing capacity over to this one order. However, it is a long-term contract, and the margin is good. They accept.

THIRTEEN Hassan is not in Cairo for interim debriefing, he is in Benghazi. He is a double agent, working ultimately for PLO. His real masters instruct him to hijack Coparelli before Dickstein gets there. (The PLO can't make atom bombs, but think of the publicity.) Hassan's priority, then, is to find out exactly when and where the hijack is to take place.

Rostov's squirrels locate Stromberg, and Rostov has it

bugged with a radio beacon.

Dickstein visits the Jewish owner of a seamen's employment agency in Antwerp. The Israeli government will shortly be asking a compulsory favour, he tells the man.

FOURTEEN Hassan is now out on a limb. Rostov does not need to know the exact timing of the hijack: with a bug on the Stromberg and a man aboard Coparelli, he is already right on top of the situation. So Hassan has to find out all on his own, and suddenly it's amateur night. In desperation he confides in Ashford, who he knows to be pro-Palestine. Suza overhears the conversation from behind the box hedge. Realising that Dickstein is likely to be killed, she wants desperately to warn him - but she does not know where she is. So she pretends to join forces with Hassan, in the hope that they will locate Dickstein and then Suza can raise the alarm.

Ashford dredges up Al Cortone from his memory. However, Cortone won't give away secrets to Hassan. But he might to Suza. Hassan and Suza go to Buffalo together.

While Coparelli is loading in Antwerp her chief engineer ^sdisappears, shanghaied by Dickstein, and is replaced, via the seamen's employment agency, by Dickstein's man Koff.

The Coparelli sails. While at sea she is bought by Dickstein's Company B.

FIFTEEN Suza sees Cortone. He knows she is who she says she is, because he remembers her lookalike mother. Also, Dickstein has told him he is in love with her. All the same he's not going to give her the Sicilian address just like that. But

the Dickstein team cannot be reached by phone. So Cortone announces he will take Suza there.

When they arrive the Stromberg has just sailed. Hassan kills Cortone. Hassan and Suza rendezvous with Rostov. They now trust Suza because she led them to Sicily.

SIXTEEN Rostov and Suza board a fast Polish merchant vessel, the Karla, crewed by KGB heavies. But the heavies are only insurance: Rostov's plan is to collide with Dickstein's ship after the theft has taken place. The hijack will be exposed in the subsequent maritime inquiry, causing the Israelis extreme international embarrassment as well as fouling up their nuclear scheme.

Hassan also sets sail, from Annaba on the Algerian coast, aboard a PLO ship. Knowing when and where the Stromberg departed, Hassan is able to figure out ~~when~~ the earliest possible moment for Dickstein's hijack, and get there a day before.

Egypt's reactor goes operational. Borg's agent sabotages it, gaining a few precious days.

SEVENTEEN Aboard the Coparelli, engineer Koff rigs a breakdown and announces that the ship will have to be towed to port for repairs. The captain cables the owners - now, of course, Dickstein's Company B. The Gil Hamilton, waiting in the vicinity, heaves-to and takes the crew off the Coparelli, leaving only a handful of agents, Koff himself, and Rostov's man who hides in a lifeboat. (The crew are to be taken to the next port of call and paid off.)

The point of all this is to clear the way for Dickstein

& Co. However, it also clears the way for Hassan and the PLO.

EIGHTEEN The PLO hijack now goes off v~~er~~y smoothly. Unfortunately for Hassan, the Coparelli is still disabled, so he can't go anywhere with his uranium.

Rostov's man, hidden in the lifeboat, reports the hijack to the Karla. Rostov doesn't want the PLO to have the uranium - the USSR gets nothing out of that deal. Suza comes up with a smart idea. Radio to Dickstein aboard the Stromberg, she says. Pretend to be a survivor from the PLO hijack. Warn Dickstein.

Rostov does so. Forewarned, Dickstein is able to win back the Coparelli and send the PLO team to Davy Jones's locker.

NINETEEN Now Dickstein's plan goes ahead. The Stromberg and the Coparelli switch identities: names, logs, everything. The Coparelli is repaired. (Stromberg was of course carrying the necessary spare part.) The Stromberg is scuttled. The Coparelli, now called Stromberg but still carrying the uranium, sails for Haifa.

The Coparelli has vanished off the face of the earth. But - and here comes the smart bit - nobody cares. Dickstein has bought her and paid cash money. The crew has been paid off. The insurers have not been presented with a claim.

Who will miss the uranium? The Genoa processors have received a cable warning them of an indefinite delay. F.A. Pedler have received a cheque for the value of their undelivered cargo. When they inquire, they will find that the shippers have disappeared.

If they are inclined to press the matter, their biggest customer, the Israeli Army, will quietly advise them to drop it.

So, perfect.

Except for Rostov, the Karla, and Suza.

TWENTY The Polish ship sets a collision course for Coparelli.

At great risk to herself, Suza gets on the radio and warns Dickstein. Unable to outrun the Karla, Dickstein doubles back and attacks while Suza lights a diversionary fire aboard the Karla. There is a pitched battle, KGB versus Mossad, with Suza in the middle. The Israelis win. They put the surviving Russians in a rowing boat, sink the Karla, and sail into Haifa covered with glory.

EPILOGUE In 1973 the Israelis, losing the Yom Kippur War, threaten to use their bomb. The threat persuades the USA to airlift conventional weapons to them.

Now the Egyptians are losing, and they decide to use their bomb. The Russians refuse to press the button. They are subsequently expelled from Egypt, and take their bomb with them.

Dickstein and Suza's first child is born.

POSTSCRIPT

ISRAEL SUSPECTED OF HIJACKING SHIP WITH URANIUM

Israel is believed to have been behind the disappearance from the high seas nine years ago of a uranium shipment large enough to build 30 nuclear weapons, it was disclosed yesterday.

Officials say that the incident was 'a real James Bond affair' and that although intelligence agencies in four countries investigated the mystery, it was never determined what had actually happened to the 200 tons of uranium ore that vanished ...

- from the 'Daily Telegraph', 7 May 1977.

THE END