

From The Decision

It is midsummer in 1937. Hugh Caldwell is on his way to join the International Brigade in Barcelona. He is with another British Communist, Roger Black, who has been sent at the express command of Moscow. They are travelling over the Pyrenees with their Spanish guide Tomás.

They had been walking for hours now, and their guide had not slackened his pace at all. The jagged peaks rose in darkened forms around them as they made their way up the mountain path. The scree-strewn mountainside was hard to walk on, and in the lessening light the way was becoming unclear. They could hear nothing stir around them. Even the cicadas had fallen silent. The dryness of the air caught at Hugh's throat as he pushed upwards. Their guide was a small wiry Basque, with a weathered complexion that made it hard to guess his age. His natural fitness made light work of the almost vertical climb. Hugh shifted his backpack on his shoulders to ease the tension in his neck. He felt his feet slip on the loose debris, dislodging small stones. The sound echoed in the valley as they scattered down the mountainside.

The guide turned round, and placed a finger to his lips impatiently. Hugh nodded briefly, and carried on. Roger followed them. His breathing was becoming laboured, and he stumbled several times as they climbed ever higher.

The air seemed thinner, and Hugh found it hard to take in enough oxygen in each breath. He touched the guide's shoulder to halt him.

'Tomás, I don't think we can carry on for much longer. It's getting too dark to see where we're going,' Hugh said. 'Roger's finding it hard to keep up.'

‘Only a little further Señor. We’ve got to get over to the other side before light. It’s too dangerous to stay here,’ Tomás said.

Hugh’s legs felt leaden and his feet were unresponsive as he carried on. Roger continued to fall behind, but Hugh kept going to encourage him onwards. He doubted that the other man had ever undertaken a climb such as this in his life. A sharp-tongued cockney who had spent his working life as a clerk, he was not a natural athlete. He seemed surprised to find himself in the group that was struggling up the mountain in an attempt to evade the French police, who were patrolling the border routes with a sporadic ferocity.

The night chill descended and the sweat cooled on Hugh’s skin, so that even with the effort of walking he shivered uncontrollably. Just as he thought they would not be able to go another step Tomás seemed to disappear around the corner of the path, and he strained to see where he had gone.

‘Bloody hell, why can’t he just stop?’ Roger said.

‘I think he might have. Come on, we’re nearly done for the night,’ Hugh said.

As they rounded the rock formation that blocked their view, they could pick out Tomás huddled in the lee of the mountain.

‘This is where we stay until first light,’ Tomás said. He pulled a blanket from his pack, flung it over himself and lay on the shingle ground as though it was a feather mattress. ‘Sleep now.’

‘It’s all right for him, he’s used to it,’ Roger said.

‘Get some sleep while you can,’ Hugh said. ‘We’ve got a long way to go tomorrow. We’ve got to make the rendezvous.’

‘I’m not happy about this, Caldwell. Nothing’s organised properly,’ Roger said. ‘I’ve got my orders, and these Spaniards are a bloody nightmare.’

Hugh could hear Roger mutter as he shifted in vain to get himself into a more comfortable position. Hugh stretched his aching legs out and rested his head on his backpack. The day flashed through his mind as he tried to relax his limbs and breathe deeply. Roger was proving to be a truculent burden. His Moscow training had inspired a slavish attention to the Russian doctrine that made him inflexible and curiously naive. As he did up his jacket to keep the wind at bay, Hugh closed his eyes, and dismissed Roger from his mind.

He was jerked awake by a kick to his ankles. A hand was clasped over his mouth, pushing his lips against his teeth until he could taste blood. The daylight was weak, but he could see Tomás was being held by his arms as well. An ancient gun was being wielded by a nervous-looking member of the group. They were dressed in worn-looking clothes, with woollen caps pulled down low over their brows. Unshaven and solidly built they exuded an air of toughness.

The man who had kicked Hugh awake seemed to be the leader. The others watched him carefully. Without taking his eyes off Hugh he pulled a knife from his belt, and held it at Hugh's throat.

The hand that pressed his mouth shut was abruptly released, but the knife still dug into the flesh of his neck. He tried to move himself away but the point dug in and he stopped. A metallic taste filled his mouth and he spat out bloodied phlegm onto the ground. The man behind him came into view. He was a younger version of the knife-wielder; perhaps a son. The young man patted down the three of them, and when he was satisfied they had no concealed weapons the knife was taken from Hugh's throat. Hugh rubbed at his neck and stood up.

Roger shook like a sheaf of wheat in a storm, and scrambled backwards as though to make himself disappear into the rock. His mouth opened and closed in panic but no noise came out.

'Tell them we've come to help them, Tomás. Say we're not the enemy,' Hugh said.

'Mis amigos,' Tomás said to the men. 'Voluntarios de inglés para nuestra causa.'

The strangers turned to each other and conferred in low tones. They looked contemptuously at Roger. A red flush appeared on his face.

'Who are these imbeciles?' Roger asked.

'Do you want to get a knife in your ribs you fool? Keep quiet and don't antagonise them,' Hugh said. He extended his hand to the knife-wielder. 'Buenos dias Comrades.'

The man ignored his outstretched hand, and answered Tomás in a dialect that Hugh found impossible to follow. Tomás shook his head vehemently, gestured to them and Hugh realised that their fate was in the balance.

The leader appeared to make up his mind. He nodded to Tomás and the tension eased.

‘It’s all right Señor, they understand now. They’re from a local village, and wary of outsiders,’ Tomás said. ‘They’ve said they’ll join us and lead us over the mountains to reach your unit.’

‘Do they speak English, Tomás?’ Hugh asked.

‘No, they don’t understand us. They’ve been sent into the mountains to watch for trouble,’ Tomás said.

‘Can we rely on them to help us across?’ Hugh said. ‘We have to RV in two days’ time, and can’t be late. We’ll be left behind if we don’t make it on time.’

‘Sí Señor, they’re good men. They know the mountains. This is Andreas and his son Carlos. The others are cousins. They’ll keep us hidden from sight. It’s okay,’ Tomás said.

He started to talk in rapid Spanish to the men. Hugh’s rudimentary grasp of the language failed to follow the strongly accented regional patois, but it seemed they were no longer seen as a threat.

Roger dusted himself off as he got up. ‘I don’t trust ’em. They seem like a dodgy lot to me. They shouldn’t treat us like this. It’s unacceptable.’

‘I’d watch it if I were you,’ Hugh said. ‘It’s their country, not ours. Tread carefully before you know the lay of the land.’

Roger snorted, but did not say anything else.

Hugh picked up his bag, and slung it over his shoulder. A sense of anticipation flooded through him. It was really happening now, he was on his way. He waited impatiently as Roger got his belongings together.

Tomás was ready to go, and their new companions gestured to them to follow. Their pace was steady and methodical, as though they were out for a morning stroll. The men obviously knew every inch of the mountains, and they led them down barely discernible animal tracks.

The river at the bottom of the next ravine was nearly dry, and they were just able to fill their water bottles. The morning was well advanced now, and progress was good. Roger was still slower than the rest of them, but he managed to keep up.

They came over the crest of a hill and down below them lay a mountain settlement. As they got closer they saw the small stone-built houses

were clustered around a church. The village houses seemed to cling to the stony ground as though they were determined to make a last stand against the inhospitable landscape, and their shutters were tightly closed.

As they scrambled down the mountainside, their guides moved more quickly.

'It's their village. They want to find out if the Rebels have been seen here,' Tomás said.

As they got closer Hugh saw that an air of neglect pervaded the place. The church, with its door wide open, seemed abandoned. Rubbish lay strewn around its entrance. A thin, battle-scarred dog lay among the detritus, so weak it seemed unable to summon the energy to lift its head to peruse the new arrivals.

A contemptuous '*cerdos fascistas*' had been roughly painted onto the ancient wall of the church, in oxide red paint. It stood out starkly against the pale stone.

Hugh walked through the open door. A strong smell of animals and human excrement pervaded the interior. It was a plain whitewashed mountain chapel, that should have had an altar laid with a locally embroidered cloth. The altar was gone, and the simple fresco depiction of the Virgin Mary on the curved end wall was crudely streaked with the same oxide paint in a random scribble. Broken pews lay in smithereens, and he had to pick his way to the back of the church.

Hugh fleetingly thought about the chapel at school with its fluted arches and polished carved wooden stalls. The smell of beeswax from the liturgical candles filling the air. Sunlight would filter through the stained-glass windows and leave patches of vivid colour on the stone floors, like jewelled remnants. A far cry from this desecrated and dismissed building. He was glad the tight hold of the church had been broken, but the squalor of its aftermath was almost shocking.

He could hear voices outside, and as his eyes adjusted to the bright light he realised that the villagers had come out of their houses to look with curiosity at the *extraños* from an unknown land. His first impression was that the inhabitants were old; there were no youngsters among them. A crowd of about thirty people clustered around. The women were dressed in black with headscarves covering their hair. The men, all as weathered as

their guides, stood silently as they listened to Andreas. Smiles broke out as they understood that here were the foreigners that had come to fight with them. The simple hospitality extended to them in that dusty square seemed at odds with the ruination of the church and the air of decay that pervaded the place.

A small elderly woman with the sunken cheeks of the toothless handed them chewy bread and salty butter. A pitcher of slightly sour goat's milk was passed round and they were watched avidly as they ate and drank.

The dog crept out from underneath the steps of the church, enticed by the smell of food. The old woman picked up a shard of roof tile and threw it at the animal. It yelped and slunk away, obviously used to such treatment.