

THE YELLOWCAKE PIRATES

by KEN FOLLETT

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From the Daily Telegraph, 7 May 1977:

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 ...

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THE YELLOWCAKE PIRATES

1968: there is a dispute in the Israeli Cabinet. The Hawks want to build nuclear weapons. The Doves raise two objections: (a) the effect would be ultimately to justify the Russians in supplying nuclear bombs to the Arabs; (b) although Israel has the technology to build the bombs, she has no natural resources of uranium and no one would sell it to her. The Doves prevail until Pierre Borg, head of the Mossad, informs the Cabinet that Egypt has a secret nuclear development project. This answers objection (a). Borg has the answer to objection (b), too: steal the uranium. The Cabinet agrees.

Borg assigns the job to one of his Special Operations men, Nat Dickstein, a Jewish New Yorker who went to Israel after an early disillusionment in Vietnam. An intelligent cynic with a Lenny Bruce sense of humour, Dickstein sees the world in terms not of Good Guys and Bad Guys but of My People and The Rest. Small, bespectacled and frail, he is capable of sudden cold-blooded violence. His expertise in explosives, weaponry and military planning are products of a secret physical cowardice which dates from his time in a North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp.

His brief is to steal the uranium in such a way that initially it will seem simply to have been lost. The owners and the radiation authorities will be so embarrassed that they will hush it up; and when they discover the truth they will be compromised by their own cover-up.

Dickstein's first move is to penetrate the Brussels headquarters of Euratom, the European nuclear energy authority, where track is kept of all radioactive materials stored or in transit within member countries. He subverts a permit clerk there (not too difficult - the information is not top secret) and visits several installations where uranium is stored. He could steal the stuff all right, he decides, but security is so tight that the theft would be discovered instantly..

He plumps for stealing a consignment of uranium in transit, preferably at sea; and after more work with his Euratom contact he picks on a cargo of yellowcake (uranium oxide) which is to go from Antwerp to Genoa aboard the German-owned motor vessel Coparelli. There are two reasons for the choice: (a) the Euratom permit for the transfer is dated three months hence, giving Dickstein time to set up the heist; and (b) the Coparelli has an identical sister ship, the Stromberg.

Right at the start the whole operation is jeopardized by one of those accidents which are the permanent hazard of intelligence work: Rostov, a Soviet agent in Brussels, recognizes Dickstein. It was Rostov who interrogated Dickstein in Vietnam; but now we learn that the interrogation was so terrible that Dickstein has repressed the memory and forgotten Rostov. Nevertheless, Dickstein held out under interrogation and succeeded in deceiving Rostov at a point where most men are in too much pain to lie. This defeat wounded Rostov's pride and ruined his career.

So Rostov puts Dickstein under surveillance, assuming he is with CIA. The surveillance leads the Russians to the Euratom contact before Dickstein disappears again.

Dickstein goes to Hamburg, sets up a legitimate shipping company, and buys the Stromberg. The company begins to trade in a small way. He also sets up a second shipping company, with all the right documentation, an office and a secretary - but this company does no trade at all.

He flies to London to visit Lloyds for more information on the Coparelli. Here he meets and falls for Suza, who is beautiful, tender, sexy - and Iranian. They make out, and now Dickstein confesses that this is the first time he has been able to make love since Vietnam. His developing relationship with Suza is observed, with suspicion and hostility, by Pierre Borg.

Meanwhile Rostov interrogates the Euratom clerk, and concludes that Dickstein plans to steal the Coparelli's uranium. He doesn't know how, though he guesses it has to do with the sister ship; but more importantly, he doesn't understand why - because he still thinks Dickstein is CIA.

Dickstein returns to New York to call in an old debt. In Vietnam he saved the life of Al Cortone. Now he visits Al Cortone Sr, known as Don Cortone. He

asks Cortone to arrange for him to use a large house - any house - on the coast of Sicily for a few weeks - and no questions asked. Cortone: "Is that all?"

Rostov has followed up the sister-ship link and discovered that the Stromberg is now owned by a company which he is able to connect with the Mossad. Now that he knows this is an Israeli operation, it makes sense. He arranged to be kept informed of the Stromberg's movements.

In Antwerp Dickstein visits the Jewish owner of a seamen's employment agency. He tells the man that the Israeli government will shortly be asking a favour - or else. The man is compliant.

The heist is now set up. This is the plan.

While the Coparelli is loading in Antwerp its chief engineer will disappear - shanghaied by Dickstein - and be replaced, via the employment agency, with Dickstein's man Koff.

As soon as she sails Dickstein's phoney shipping company will buy her. Papers will be handed over while she is at sea, with Dickstein's company undertaking to fulfil the ship's existing commitments and deliver the current cargo.

At a prearranged spot in the Mediterranean Koff will ~~xxx~~ engineer a mechanical breakdown which will cripple the ship, and will announce that she must be towed to port for engine repairs.

A ship belonging to Dickstein's legitimate company will leave-to, offer help, be unable to assist with the busted engines, but willingly take most of the Coparelli's crew to its next port of call (where they will be paid off and sent home by a Dickstein agent).

Next comes the Stromberg, with a hand-picked crew plus the sicilian contingent in case of unforeseen rough stuff. They will overwhelm the remaining crew of the Coparelli, paint over her name and retitle her Stromberg, repair the engines (since they knew what was going to go wrong they came equipped with the wherewithal to put it right), scuttle the original Stromberg, and sail the new Coparelli/Stromberg into Haifa on schedule. The yellowcake, disguised as cattle feed, will be off-loaded and driven to a desert military base.

The owners of the uranium will eventually go to the original owners of the Coparelli and ask what happened to their cargo. They will be referred to Dickstein's phoney company, which will have disappeared off the face of the earth.

And - here comes the smart bit - there is nobody else who cares what happened to the Coparelli. The crew have all found other jobs; the captain has been bribed or coerced into silence; the original owners have got their money; and Lloyds have not been presented with a claim. There is no one left to give a damn.

That's the plan. This is how it goes wrong.

Immediately before the heist, the crew of the Stromberg have to be dismissed

in Haifa and the hand-picked crew taken on. Rostov's agent in Haifa reports this. Rostov connects the switch with the imminent sailing of the Coparelli, and realises the heist is on. He assumes the uranium will be transferred to the Stromberg at sea. He instructs his agent to put a powerful bug on the Stromberg. The agent accomplishes this.

Sadly, you can't afford to use high-grade agents for this sort of work; and Rostov's man in Haifa is known to the local spycatchers. Consequently Pierre Borg learns of the bug.

Borg assumes the operation has been blown by Suza, Dickstein's Arab lover. He has her picked up, then tells Dickstein about the bug and says: "If the operation fails, Suza dies." Dickstein never liked Borg too much, and now he knows why. Leave the bug where it is, he says.

Aboard the Coparelli Koff has some very tense moments, but succeeds in faking the accident. The next stage - getting rid of the crew - goes off all right. However, what nobody could have foreseen is that the captain of the Coparelli is involved in drug smuggling. In Marseilles he has picked up several million dollars worth of Brown Sugar for delivery to Holland, and consequently has on board a dozen Corsican heavyweights thinly disguised as jolly jack tars.

So, when the Stromberg heaves-to and Dickstein & Co come aboard they meet determined opposition. The Israelis win the fight; but it has delayed them crucially, as we shall see.

Having taken the Coparelli, Dickstein sends the Stromberg on its way, bug and all, to divert Rostov. Rostov's plan is to have a Polish merchant ship collide with the Stromberg, and for the uranium theft to be exposed in the resulting inquiry, thereby causing the Israelis extreme international embarrassment. However, when the Polish ship comes into view, the skeleton crew leave the Stromberg, get clear, and blow it up.

Now, Dickstein's plan was for the Stromberg to be many miles away from the Coparelli by the time this happened. But because of the fight with the Corsicans, and the consequent delay, Rostov is still able to locate and chase the Coparelli.

There is now little room for subtleties. A Polish merchantman, heavily armed and crewed by Russian commandos, is chasing a Liberian motor vessel, unarmed but crewed by Israeli commandos. Dickstein knows he can't win a sea battle; and as they cross the Mediterranean toward Haifa, it becomes clear that they can't get to port before the Polish ship catches them.

So, when night falls, Dickstein takes a team of killers in a small boat and goes back to the Polish ship. They board it. The fight is long, and most of Dickstein's team die, but the Polish ship is diverted, and the Coparelli, now renamed Stromberg, enters Haifa just as Dickstein and the few surviving members of the boarding party escape from the Polish ship.

The operation is successfully concluded. Borg releases Suza, whereupon Dickstein beats Borg up and gets fired. Then it is revealed that Egypt never had a nuclear arms programme - Borg made it up to support the Hawks in the Cabinet. Borg is fired, Dickstein gets his job, and the yellowcake is buried in the desert and forgotten.

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