NEVER SURRENDER

MICHAEL DOBBS



HarperCollins*Publishers*

This is a work of fiction.
Apart from well-known historical figures and events, the names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2003
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Michael Dobbs 2003

Michael Dobbs asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 00 710725 0
ISBN 0 00 710726 9 (trade pbk)

Typeset in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production
Limited, Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Limited, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

ONE

Flanders, 1940.

In Private Donald Chichester's view, the war in France had been little short of sublime. Month after endless month of – well, nothing. No shelling, no air attacks, scarcely a shot fired in anger since they'd arrived the previous September. *La drôle de guerre*, as the locals called it. No war at all.

That suited Donald Chichester. He was not yet twenty, with dark hair and deep-set, earnest eyes that seemed to be in constant search of something he had lost. He was tall, well sculpted, but on the lean side, like a plant that had been forced to grow too quickly. There was an air of vulnerability about him that set him apart from the other men who had gone to war brimming with extravagant if superficial claims of confidence. Yet he was always bound to be set apart from the others, for he wasn't any proper sort of soldier.

Don Chichester was a nursing orderly serving with the 6th Field Ambulance Unit. Woman's work, as the fighting men suggested, a soldier who had taken up bucket and mop rather than arms, who made other men's beds and who cleaned up after the sick. There were many ways to fight this war, but being a nursing orderly wasn't any of them.

He had arrived in France eight months earlier after a crossing from Southampton to Cherbourg that had been a misery. He'd

reacted badly to the typhus and typhoid vaccinations, which had made his arm swell like a bloated pig and given him a raging temperature, but there had been no point in complaining. Sympathy was as short in supply as everything else. The 6th had arrived in France with old equipment and slack-geared vehicles, only to discover that their food supplies, spares and half their officers had been sent to an entirely different destination. The confusion of disembarkation had grown worse when the only new ambulance the unit possessed was hoisted on a rope cradle from the deck of the transport ship and swivelled over the side of the dock. As Don watched helplessly, the cradle had begun to unravel like a Christmas pullover, sending the ambulance thumping to earth. It bounced almost a foot in the air, then promptly collapsed into every one of its component parts.

The fate of the ambulance had reminded Don of the last time he had seen his father. Their last row. Not too many words, they'd never gone in for words much, only periods of cold silence that seemed to say it all. His father had been standing in front of the old Victorian fireplace, beside the photograph of Don's mother, the mother he had never known. But how he had grown into her looks, and more so with every passing year until there was no mistaking the resemblance. The only attributes he seemed to have inherited from his father were a stubborn chin and an ability to harbour silent fury.

They lived in his father's vicarage – a house of peace and goodwill, according to the tapestry on the wall, but not on that day. Don had tried to explain himself yet again, but the father wouldn't listen. He never had. He was a bloody vicar, for pity's sake, he preached eternity to the entire world, yet never seemed to have any time left for his only son. Perhaps it would have been different if there had been a mother to

rise between them, but instead they were like strands of badly knotted rope that twisted ever tighter. The Reverend Chichester had stood in front of the fireplace shaking with anger – the only emotion Don could ever remember him displaying – and called him Absalom.

The son who betrayed his father.

Then he had used that one final word.

Coward.

Any further exchange seemed superfluous.

So Donald Chichester had gone off to be trained for his war, watching at a distance as the others wrote letters to their loved ones or bargained feverishly for two-day passes home. When the training was over and their war was about to begin, they had hung despairingly out of the windows of their embarkation train until distance and smoke had finally smothered all sight of the families they were leaving behind. Through it all, Don sat back, gently mocking the overflowing affection, and twisting deep inside.

The 6th had left England in emotion and arrived at Cherbourg in chaos. They had then driven to their billet three hundred miles away in Flines-les-Râches on the Belgian border. It was raining. The British Expeditionary Force had arrived.

It continued to rain. In fact, the weather proved to be abominable, the autumn one of the wettest on record followed by a winter where the snow lay thick and everything froze solid, including the radiator in every ambulance. But so long as German radiators froze too, Don was happy. Even when they attempted to dig sanitation pits and discovered that the water table lay beneath their feet, turning their main dressing station into a quagmire, Don was content. The war was worthless, and every step he took in the fetid mud served only to confirm it.

The conditions caused disease, of course. All drinking

water had to be treated with sterilizing powder, a process which usually left the water tasting so disgusting that many Tommies decided to drink the foul French water instead, with predictable results. There were many other ailments. Training accidents. Traffic accidents. Afflictions of the feet. Bronchial troubles brought on by the fact that most of the soldiers had only one uniform, which had to be dried out while being worn. And venereal disease, as the British soldiers grew tired of their phoney war and succumbed in ever-growing numbers to boredom, drink and the local doxies. The follies of Flanders. Just like their fathers before them.

As the dismal months of phoney war stumbled on, there was an ever-increasing number of men who complained about the uselessness of it all, how it was a mindless war and not worth fighting. Wrong place, wrong time, and an awful bloody idea. Just what Don had argued.

That was, until the early hours of 10 May. Things changed. Dawn broke through a cloudless sky, and breakfast at the field dressing station where Don was posted found the officers squinting into the rising sun. They were muttering about reports of air activity. A church bell began ringing insistently in the distance. Something was up.

A sense of anticipation crept amongst those around him, a nervous excitement he was unable to share. The distance he had always known stood between him and the other soldiers once more began to assert itself.

'There's going to be a shooting war after all, Chichester,' the sergeant snapped. 'Not that you bloody care.'

An hour later, the sergeant was back with new orders. They were moving out. Two hours' time. Into Belgium. Problem was, none of their training had had anything to do with Belgium. They'd been preparing themselves for a war just like the last one, a steady, solid, stay-where-you-were war. A war

fought from behind those tank trenches and pillboxes they'd spent their months in France building. They hadn't even been allowed to recce inside Belgium, it was off limits to everyone, they'd been told, and particularly the Germans.

So it was with renewed confusion that the unit prepared to get under way. Don packed the surgical kit, checked his medical bag, counted the field dressings and knocked down the casualty tents until he thought he was ready, but then he was instructed to help load additional supplies from the officers' quarters into one of the ambulances. A desk, several filing cabinets, a typewriter, a small library of Michelin guides, two tea chests of crockery, a fishing rod, a case of sherry, three new uniforms and a pair of highly polished dancing shoes: all were piled on board. Only then did Private 14417977 Donald Chichester, Nursing Orderly Grade 3 and noncombatant Conscientious Objector, drive off to war.

The three men gathered at the tall window to mourn, their cheeks fired by the setting sun as they sipped at glasses of champagne. The wine was warm. It always was in the Foreign Office.

'A day for our diaries, eh?' suggested the Minister in whose elegant office they had gathered.

'The darkest day in English history,' the second man suggested, practising a line for the entry he would make that night. Henry Channon was known by all as 'Chips'. He was the Minister's parliamentary aide, an envied and potentially influential position, but it would be for his keen-eyed diaries rather than for his notoriously blunted political wits that his reputation would endure.

'Will any of us survive?' the third and youngest of the companions enquired. 'Jock' Colville was only twenty-five

yet for seven months had been a private secretary to the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. It had given him a ringside seat at the bonfire of hopes, conceits and monstrous complacencies that a few hours earlier had finally consumed his master. Chamberlain was no more, his resignation handed to a reluctant monarch, and now many more sacrifices would be required.

'Has it come to that? A struggle to survive? Oh, I do so love being part of all this. I should miss it so,' Chips muttered wistfully.

'I was rather thinking of the war,' Colville countered.

'Ah, but we seem destined to fight on so many fronts,' the Minister added, his eyes wandering northward across the gravel stretches of Horse Guards Parade to the white sandstone of the Admiralty building beyond. 'Rab' Butler was the second most senior Minister in the Foreign Office, a man of considerable intellectual powers whose career had embraced both ambition and Neville Chamberlain. He was talked about as a future leader. Inevitably it made him enemies, and perhaps the most significant of all his enemies was the man across the way in the Admiralty – a man who, less than an hour ago, had taken the King's commission to become the new Prime Minister.

'They say he cannot last. That he will soon be gone. Even that Neville may be back,' Channon suggested.

'To save us all from disaster,' Butler intoned.

'From the Luftwaffe.'

'From Mr Churchill,' Butler corrected.

'Such a vulgar man,' Channon muttered, replenishing their glasses.

Butler's lips drooped in distaste. He had extraordinary lips, weak, as though constructed of wax that had strayed too near the flame and been melted. His eyes also drooped. It gave him an air of ingrained disapproval.

'But Churchill's a man with experience of war,' Colville reminded them.

'There is nothing to be gained either from war or from Winston Churchill,' the Minister all but spat. 'The fate of our country has been placed in the hands of the greatest political adventurer of modern times. A half-breed American whose entire life has been littered with failures for which other people have paid.'

'And now poor Neville.'

A pause.

'What will you do, Jock?' Channon asked the younger man.

'I think I might apply for a transfer to the armed services. The RAF, perhaps.' He seemed unaware of his implied rebuke to Butler. If war was not an answer, what was to be the point of fighting it? But the Minister had more advice to offer.

'No. Wait, Jock. Don't draw stumps just yet. This game isn't over. Let Winston have his day dabbling at war. And when he falters, and then fails, as he always has, the country will need men like us. More than ever.'

'And after Winston?'

'Pray that it will be an Englishman. Perhaps Neville once more. And if not him, then Halifax. But better Neville.'

The sun was almost set, its embers sprinkled wide across the spires and cupolas around them. The end of more than just another day. Chips raised his glass.

'Then, to the King over the Water.'

'To Neville,' Butler agreed.

'And may God send us victorious,' Colville whispered, finishing the last of his warm champagne.

'So how was he?'

Winston Churchill looked up from the letter he was writing

to inspect the man who had just burst in upon him. A pall of cigar smoke hovered across the room in the Admiralty.

'His Majesty was as ever charming. A little awkward, perhaps. Dressed in his uniform as Admiral of the Fleet.'

Unbidden, his visitor helped himself to a large whisky from the tray that sat beside the Prime Minister. The splash of soda was brief, no more than a gesture.

'You know,' Churchill continued, 'I do believe His Majesty would willingly give up all the splendours and circumstances of his role in order to return to the duties of his career in the navy.'

'He's out of his depth.'

'No, I think more out of his experience,' Churchill growled. 'Rather like us all at this moment.' He thrust his own empty glass in the direction of his visitor, silently demanding it be refilled. As on almost every occasion in the seventeen years since they had met, Brendan Bracken complied with his older friend's wishes. Bracken was a man often derided as an outrageous fantasist by those who knew him slightly, and no one could claim to know him well, not even Churchill. But for all his faults and legendary confrontations with the truth, he had remained loyal to Churchill when more respectable political colleagues had deserted him. All his life Churchill had been a man of few friends, and this friend he valued more than most.

'Still, must have been awkward for you. For both of you, given the past,' Bracken continued.

Ah, the past . . . Churchill wanted to believe that all his past life had been but a preparation for the trial that lay ahead, yet in truth it had been a lifetime of uneasy adventures thrown together with outright failures. During the last war, for instance, he had been hurled from office – not simply resigned as his father had done before him, but thrown out by those

who thought him inadequate for the job. Many of them had still not changed their minds, the King included. No, it wasn't success that had brought him here, only the still more monumental failures of others. Churchill looked up once more from his blotter. 'He covered it with a little joke. Asked me if I knew why he had summoned me. I replied that I simply couldn't imagine. So he offered me a cigar and asked me to form a government. Of which, I suppose, you expect to be a member. Along with many others.'

'The joy of it!' Bracken threw his arms around in excitement. 'After all these years, the chance to even the score. To do unto others . . .' He clapped his hands. 'You know, I've just been over to Downing Street. Thought I'd take a look. Went by the back gate into the secretaries' rooms. Rushing around bundling everything into sacks and waste-paper baskets, they were, even had a fire roaring in one of the grates. Several in tears. It was as though the enemy had arrived.'

'You don't understand, Brendan: in their eyes, he has.'

Bracken lit himself a cigar using a petrol lighter that threw an immense flame, adding to the aerial confusion. 'So – who is to be in this government of ours?'

'My War Cabinet,' Churchill responded, 'will consist of four men, apart from myself.' He cleared his throat as if making an official proclamation. 'There will be Mr Attlee and Mr Greenwood from the Labour Party.'

Bracken shifted uneasily in his chair.

'Lord Halifax.'

An eyebrow arched in disapproval.

'And Mr Neville Chamberlain.'

Bracken gasped, momentarily brought to silence. 'You cannot be serious.'

'In most deadly earnest. Our lives may depend upon it.'

'But . . .' Suddenly the energy was upon him once more, his body contorting in exasperation. 'They're the four most bloody-minded men in the country. Two socialists with whom you've got nothing in common, the former Prime Minister who's devoted most of his limited talents to keeping you at the outer edge of the universe, and . . .' He wondered for a moment how best to sum up Edward Halifax, Churchill's chief rival for the post. 'And an Old Etonian.'

'You're right.' Churchill smiled. Throughout all the years of drought Bracken had had an unquenchable talent for making him smile. 'You are absolutely right. We need more Harrovians.'

'Seriously, Winston, how can you include Chamberlain after everything that's happened?'

'Can't you see, Brendan, it's because of everything that has happened that I must embrace him? He is still the leader of the majority party in the House of Commons, and if I am to build a truly national government I must include him as well as the socialists.' He picked up his pen and resumed his work. 'That is what I have had to insist to Mr Attlee, who, I'm afraid, rather shares your opinion about Mr Chamberlain.'

'But you've nothing in common with any of them.'

'I can count on the claws of a chicken's foot the number of men you and I can trust. It's not enough. We need more.' He finished off the letter with a flourish. 'Which is why I have just written to the Kaiser enquiring whether, before the Wehrmacht arrives, he would wish to exchange his exile in Holland for a suitable small establishment in this country.'

Bracken choked on his drink, spluttering, when at last he could, 'You expect the old Kaiser, the man who started the last bloody war, to help you in this one?'

'No, I don't expect that. But I would like it. I know him, of course. Attended manoeuvres with him in 1909. An odious and ill-formed man. But useful. If by any chance he would agree, oh, how it would distract Hitler. Take his eye off the ball. Kaiser versus the Fuehrer, German against German.' He sealed the envelope he had been addressing and rang a hand bell. 'I would do a deal with the Devil if only he would part company with Hitler for a moment. We do so desperately need some distraction. We have enemies enough without creating more. Which is why we must have Neville, and Edward Halifax, too. And all the rest.'

He rang the bell again, more impatiently.

'And for me?'

'For you, Brendan? Minister of Information, I thought. My own private Goebbels. Waging war with words. You're good at that. And we have so little else with which to wage war.'

'Thank you, Winston. With all my heart. But – no. I think I should be here, by your side. At least until you have the show up and running.'

'You would refuse your own ministry?'

'There are so few who know you, understand your ways.'

Suddenly Churchill rose to his feet and flung open the door behind his desk. It led to a corridor, and at its end, deep in conversation, stood two male secretaries. Churchill's shoulders heaved in irritation.

'Have you both been deafened by the blast of some enemy bomb?' he shouted at them. 'Can there be any other reason why you have failed to respond to my bell?'

Bemused, they looked towards him and started to approach.

'Fly! Fly! Or shall I call the guard to encourage you at the point of a fixed bayonet?'

The first man broke into a hurried shuffle; the second, seeking salvation, ducked into an open office door. It was Colville who arrived, his face a cauldron of embarrassment and anger.

'I'm sorry, Prime Minister. A little confusion in responsibilities. We were rather expecting you to arrive at Downing Street this evening.'

'Downing Street is still the home of Mr Chamberlain. I have offered it to him and Mrs Chamberlain until they can make suitable alternative arrangements. In the meantime you are to attend upon me here.'

'I'm sorry, sir. As I said, a matter of confusion.'

'And you are to run, do you hear me? Every time you hear that bell, you run, not walk, for so long as this war is in progress. I will not have walkers.'

Colville swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry with resentment. Never in his public service had he been spoken to like this. Still, it made his decision all the easier. He wouldn't put up with it for a moment longer than would be necessary to get himself a transfer. Submarines, for all he cared, after this.

'Tell me, where did you go to school?' Churchill demanded.

What? What had his wretched school to do with it? 'Why, Harrow, sir. But a while after you.'

'Ah, another Harrovian. We make good runners at Harrow. You'll do.'

And so, through the accident of his education, Colville stood condemned.

'Now, get me Lord Halifax on the phone. I have an urgent letter for him to deliver.'

'It's gone midnight. His Lordship will be asleep in bed, I'm afraid, sir.'

'You know that for a fact?'

'I know His Lordship, sir.'

'Nevertheless, get him on the phone for me.'

'It will be a most exceptional pleasure for him,' Colville responded, tripping over his own sarcasm.

Churchill thrust his head forward. It made him look like a cannonball in flight. 'No, it will not be a pleasure for him at this hour. And in future it will not be exceptional, either. Pray inform His Lordship of that, and anyone else that matters.'

Without another word, Churchill went back to his work and began writing a fresh letter. Colville, his face ashen, backed slowly out of the door.

Bracken hooked his leg over the arm of his chair and began to chuckle. 'As I said, Winston, there are so few who understand your ways. I think I'd better stay.'

Churchill's head fell towards the notepaper. 'Thank God there's one person in this room who knows what to do.'

It had been like a triumphal progress from ancient times. Slowly the British army moved forward across the frontier into what, until that morning, had been the green fields and gentle canals of neutral Belgium. At every village and crossroads they were greeted like heroes. Old men shuffled forward in carpet slippers to offer them bottles of beer, with womenfolk at their side bearing baskets of cheeses and oranges, and daughters who climbed up on the vehicles with their snatches of schoolgirl English to hand out an abundance of flowers and kisses. The BEF advanced upon the enemy with lilac on their helmets and dictionaries in their pockets, and soon the songs of old could be heard encouraging them on their way – 'Tipperary', 'Pack Up Your Troubles', and a new one, a tune about how they were going to hang out their washing on the Siegfried Line.

The column was closely packed, a confusion of every sort of vehicle grinding along at the pace of the slowest, but they were all heading in the same direction. North, towards the enemy. Belgian bicycle troops meandered beside the convoy, frantically ringing their bells. It was spring, hawthorn blossom blew across their path, and the British army sweated gently in the sun.

By early evening they had passed through Brussels and were making camp in an old deserted brewery outside Mechelen. They unloaded the chairs, filing cabinets and the bottles of sherry while tea was brewed. This site was to be the Casualty Clearing Station, for the time when there were casualties. But of the enemy there was no sign. Perhaps this one was going to be easy, after all.

In the evening, the padre came round with a billycan of corned-beef stew accompanied by cigarettes and a homily about the morality of their cause. Strange, Don thought, how morality had become such a moveable feast. Why, it was less than two years ago when vicars throughout the land had climbed into their pulpits to denounce aggression and offer prayers for the triumph of appeasement and Neville Chamberlain. Yet today, from those same pulpits and plundering phrases from the same scriptures, they prayed to the Almighty that they might remember their gas masks and gain rapid victory. Whichever way you read it, kneeling down or standing on your head, it simply made you giddy.

That's not what he had explained to the Tribunal for the Registration of Conscientious Objectors, of course. For them he had displayed a morality that was clear, principled and utterly inflexible – he'd copied that much from his father. And it was his father's God-fearing morality that he offered them, everything taken from the Book, every argument backed up by scripture and psalm. They quoted the Book

back at him, all the bits about eyes for eyes and the righteousness of vengeance, but he'd spent so much more time in church and Bible classes than they had that putting down their counter-case had proved to be, quite literally, child's play.

It troubled him that he couldn't be entirely honest with the Tribunal. He would have liked to tell them that reasons why the world shouldn't set out to slaughter itself were so bloody obvious you didn't need the Bible, but that wasn't the way the Tribunal game was played.

Don had played, and he had won. Noncombatant service. No weapons, no killing. But it troubled him more than he cared to admit that he had won only by leaning on his father's beliefs, and that his father knew it. There was a little of Absalom in everyone.

As he tossed in distraction upon the floor of the abandoned brewery, other thoughts began to chisel away at his sense of well-being. If God moved in mysterious ways, so, it seemed, did the generals. The men of the British Expeditionary Force had spent half a year working flat out to build a defensive line of tank traps and pillboxes. They'd been assured it would be all but impregnable.

So why, at the first sign of trouble, had the generals ordered them to come out from behind its cover and move forward into a field of fire that was totally unprepared?

And let's not turn our back on good fortune but why, during all that long first day of advance, had there been no sign of the enemy? There hadn't been a single air attack.

As Don struggled to find some comfort on the cold concrete, one thought kept nagging at him. It was almost as though the Germans wanted them there.

* * *

At last Churchill was alone. Letters written, appointments made, officials dismissed, Bracken on his way home. The path begun.

He felt exhausted. Keeping up the spirits of others had sapped his own, and a mood of darkness clung around him. It had been a day he had dreamed of for so long, yet the reality had proved so very distant from the dream. There had been no cheering crowds at the Palace to greet him, not even curious onlookers, no one but soldiers in war garb who had stood in front of a palace that had retreated behind sandbags and shuttered windows. Then the King's little flash of humour to cover his unease. Faces long, brimming with concerns. No victorious arrival at Downing Street. Only Bracken to lift the gloom.

How he had longed for this day! A Churchill as His Majesty's First Minister, his destiny achieved, his father's memory vindicated. Yet all around he found nothing but sorrows and unspoken fear. Instead of triumph, he had found his way into a tragedy.

He sat slumped in his chair, an old man, clutching his glass of whisky in both hands as if he were afraid it might fall. No one there to see him, to help guide him through the depression that emerged like a mist from a swamp to surround him. He had such a way with words, brave and magnificent outbursts that stirred hearts, but words were for others, while he was left with nothing but his own dark thoughts.

These thoughts carried him to the oil painting that hung in a corner near the bookcase. It was a portrait of his father – not a particularly magnificent piece, one that had been painted long ago in Belfast. It showed Lord Randolph small and slim, with delicate ears and a twirling moustache, his neck surrounded with a huge moleskin collar and a polka-dot

bow-tie that Winston himself had adopted. The painting followed the son everywhere, almost haunting him, for it had been completed in 1886, the year of his father's brief triumph, which had turned so quickly to endless disaster. Lord Randolph was a rising star, one of the most powerful men in the country – some said *the* most powerful, and he believed it. He had quit the Government in the expectation of being recalled with ever greater honours, only to find his resignation greeted with ridicule. His reputation had crumbled. So had his mind, relentlessly. Winston had been still a schoolboy, not yet twelve. So long ago, yet the pain still so fresh.

He stared at the portrait. What had his father been thinking when it was painted? Had those bright protruding eyes been able to see any of the misery that lay so close ahead? Had he felt any symptoms – had he guessed in any way that he had already set out upon a path that would lead to a slow and wretched death?

No, he could not have known. No man ever knew what lay ahead.

Tiredness gnawed away at the old man and his head sank towards the glass, still clutched tightly in his two hands. Yet as the head fell forward he was once more jerked awake. He opened his eyes to find himself staring at his father. Lord Randolph was sitting in the chair opposite – not an oil painting, not an hallucination, but body and blood, so far as Winston could tell. It wasn't possible, of course, but . . .

'Papa?'

'What are you doing, Winston? Where are we?'

'In my office. At the Admiralty.'

'So, you've become a clerk in the navy, have you?'

'I followed you, Papa. Into politics.'

'Brutal game. Surprised you had the stomach for it. You

were such a weakly child, always sickening for something.'

'Politics have been my life. I entered Parliament at the same age as you, Papa. Twenty-five.'

'Ah, all those years, but to what end?' The father managed to sound both envious and dismissive. He began filling his amber cigarette-holder with a little pad of cotton wool to soak up the nicotine. The process seemed to absorb him, to the annoyance of his son. Instinctively the son decided not to reveal all of his hand, to keep something in reserve.

'I have been Home Secretary and, as you were, Chancellor of the Exchequer. For five years.'

The father, who had been Chancellor for a mere five months, seemed not to hear, his attention focused on the search for a match from deep within his pockets.

'I used your old robes, Papa, the ones you wore.'

Randolph scowled impatiently as his search continued fruitlessly.

'And until this morning I was First Lord of the Admiralty,' the son added.

'Under whose authority? Who as Prime Minister?'

'Neville Chamberlain – Joe's younger son.'

'What? A Chamberlain as Prime Minister?' The eyes of the father bulged in displeasure. 'Praise be that I never lived to see the day. Nothing but ironmongers. Why, in my day you could buy a dozen Chamberlains for a single Churchill and still get change.' He stared at Winston as though he were directly responsible for the devaluation of the currency. 'So how did this young Chamberlain do?'

'Not well.' The son chose the words with care, speaking them slowly. 'We are engaged in a horrible war with Germany, Papa, for the second time in my life. With flying machines and other terrible weapons that slaughter millions of men.'

'Millions, you say?'

'Tens of millions.'

'My God, is it possible? Then I'm glad not to have lived to see such terrible days. But we will prevail, of course.'

Again the words were chosen with care. 'Not necessarily. We may not prevail. And if we don't, we shall lose not only our armies but also our empire, even our independence.'

'Takes my breath away to hear it. Not the place it once was, eh, our England? But something always turns up. Like fresh cavalry riding out of the afternoon sun.'

'The British cavalry hasn't charged in anger in more than forty years.'

The father shook his head in consternation. 'So, who is to lead us from the jaws of such adversity?'

'I hope it will be me, Papa.'

'You, Winston? My God, but you only just sneaked into Sandhurst by the skin of your breeches. And at the third attempt. With your school record I couldn't even consider you for a career in the law. You, of all people?' He tugged at his moustache in puzzlement. 'You are an admiral? Or a general?'

'No, Papa. But I was once a major in the Yeomanry.'

The father wrinkled his nose. 'You were always getting yourself into scrapes. Getting beyond yourself. Like that time you fell off the bridge in Dorset.'

'I didn't fall. I jumped, Papa. To evade capture by my friends. I jumped onto the higher branches of a tree, but they gave way.'

'Seem to remember you were in bed for months. And for what? It was a childish game, nothing more. No judgement, that's the thing.'

'There are those who would agree with you, I fear.'

'Always sickening in bed. Caused your mother no end of

inconvenience.' The voice trailed away, diverted down a new, more gentle path. 'So . . . what of Mama?'

'She lived a long life.'

'There were . . . other men?'

(Did he truly want to hear? But he knew there would have been other men. There were always other men.) 'She married twice more.' The son pondered telling him that they had been young enough to be her sons, the last even younger than he. But somehow it didn't seem to matter any longer. 'Neither of them matched up to you, Papa.'

'Two, you say. Always a little careless with her men, your mama.' The voice now seemed strained; Winston put it down to his father's need for a smoke. He had still not lit his cigarette.

'But, in the end, loyal enough,' the father continued. 'Can't fault her loyalty, not through the last years, at least.'

The painful years of his father's decline came flooding back to the son, when his brain disease had got hold of him and he had died by fractions in public. Winston himself had died a little as he watched his father being led stumbling and incoherent from the Chamber. Decay of the brain, and of the character. The Churchill legacy.

'You have sons?'

'One. And three daughters.'

'Is he up to carrying the Churchill name?'

'A father should never give up hope for his son,' Winston responded. It was both reproach to his father and injunction to himself. His son had been named after the grandfather, Randolph, and had inherited so many of his characteristics. Rudeness, inconstancy, infidelity, lack of judgement – that's what they said about the younger Randolph, and they had said no less in the grandfather's time.

'And Jack? What of him?'

'My brother is happy. Married. A stockbroker.'

'A stock—' Randolph bit off the thought, but there was no hiding the disappointment. 'Went too soon, I did. Before my time. Always wanted more sons, but your mama . . . There was so much more still to do, to make the Churchill name stand out above the crowd. So, you have a role to play in this war.'

'I was with the King this evening.'

'Which King is that?'

'George. The Sixth.'

'What? Two more Georges?'

'And two Edwards.'

'Hah! I knew the first, of course, royal rogue that he was. Once challenged me to a duel, he did. Couldn't accept, of course, not a contest with the Prince of Wales. A pickle over some damned woman. Can't remember her name.'

The name had been Edith, Countess of Aylesford, a woman to whom passion spoke more loudly than discretion. It had caused her to become entangled not only with the Prince of Wales but also with the Churchill family in an affair that grew into one of the most sensational *causes de scandale* of the time. It had pushed Randolph's legendary lack of judgement to new and intolerable extremes, and he threatened the heir to the throne with public exposure. As a result, Randolph and his young family had been condemned to exile in Ireland and many years of royal ostracism. Winston's first memories had been not of his beloved England, but of Dublin.

'In my life there was but one monarch, Victoria. It gave us all a sense of continuity, of stability. But four since then?' the father muttered in astonishment.

'In less than forty years. And scarcely any great kings left. No Habsburgs, no Romanovs, not even a Kaiser.'

The father's jaw sagged in disbelief.

'There has been war and revolution in every corner of Europe.'

'And in England?'

'We still live as a democracy.'

'Then there is hope,' the father concluded. 'I always said: "Trust the people." Built my reputation on it. It's only a democracy that can weather the storms of political fortune, link the past with the future.'

'Tempests have struck with remarkable ferocity since democracy took charge, Papa. We may yet be swept away.'

'But still a kingdom, you say? And you are friendly, are you, with the King?'

'No, not friends. In truth, I don't think he cares for me very much. I was too close to his elder brother, the second Edward. He abdicated.'

'Oh, misery. A realm in which kings abdicate and enemies prevail? My poor, wretched England . . .'

'Papa, these times are harder than any I have known. But perhaps you can help me.'

The sharp eyes bulged in alarm. 'What? Not money again, Winston? Always begging for money.'

If it were so, it was another trait inherited directly from the father, but there seemed little point in saying so.

'No, Papa, not money. Advice. I fear our country faces nothing but disaster for a very long time. What would you do, in such hard times?'

The father's head was raised again, his impatience washing away in satisfaction that the son had acknowledged the greater wisdom of the father. 'Well, only one thing for it, Winston. Know your enemies. I didn't, you see, underestimated them, and so . . . Know your enemy. In that way you will discover how to beat him. That's it, and all of it. So if you have the ear of the government . . .' He had at last

discovered a match and bent his head to light it.

'Papa, I should tell you –'

But it was too late. As the match was struck there was a flash of considerable brilliance, and Lord Randolph was gone, the chair empty. The son was once more alone.

'Know mine enemies, Papa? But all I ever truly wanted to know was you . . .'