

Churchill's Hour

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ONE

Christmas Day, 1940.

Winston Churchill sat propped up against the pillows of his bed. The room was cold, a sullen December sky rattling at the mullioned window, but the old man didn't complain. The foul weather had kept the bombers at bay last night. Peace on earth, at least until tomorrow.

A servant entered the room carrying a pair of freshly ironed trousers on one arm and a silver tray on the other. Frank Sawyers was short, hairless, with piercing blue eyes and two missing teeth. He was no more than forty years in age yet his attitude was timeless.

'Did you knock?' Churchill's brow was split by a crease of irritation.

'As always, zur,' Sawyers said, a trifle wearily and with a pronounced lisp and Cumbrian burr.

'And what's that disgusting green stuff?' The Prime Minister took off his reading glasses and used them to indicate the jar on the silver tray. 'No medicine, do you hear me? I'll have none of your quackery. I'm not ill.'

'Chutney. Home-made. By way of me Christmas present to yer, like. With season's greetings.'

Churchill stared at the jar, his blue eyes alert as though suspecting some plot. Sawyers had a knack of producing exotic

and unexpected gifts, even through the constraints of wartime, and Churchill knew that no matter how alarming the sour green pickle might appear, it would taste delicious. He didn't have the knack himself; he'd given only books for presents, and mostly his own books at that.

As he approached the bed, the servant glared at Nelson, the patch-eyed cat who lay sprawled across the eiderdown at Churchill's feet. Nelson possessed a foul temper that had grown ever more unreliable from spending too many nights in Downing Street during the air raids, and Sawyers' loathing for the cat had grown with the number of scratch marks left on the back of his hands. He gave the beast a wide berth as he placed the tray on the bedside table and dealt with the refreshed trousers. Then he took down a vivid red silk bathrobe that was hanging on the back of the door.

'Not yet,' Churchill said, 'I've not finished my papers.'

'You'll be late,' the other man insisted. 'Family's already gathered round fire, and if you're not down there soon, Mr Oliver will be on serenading us all with his piano music.'

'Bloody racket.'

'Exactly,' Sawyers agreed, holding up the bathrobe in the manner of a matador tempting a bull.

'Not now, not now,' Churchill said, shaking the paper in his hand. 'D'you know there's a Nazi battleship on the loose in the southern Atlantic?'

'I dare say it'll still be there after luncheon.' The servant stood resolute. 'You can sink it then.'

Churchill was contemplating the next phase of this battle for domestic supremacy when, in some distant part of the old house, notes began to cascade from a piano and a baby started to cry. Instantly Nelson sprang from his warming place at the old man's feet, arching his back in displeasure before strutting from their view. Churchill had been deserted

by his last remaining ally. Sawyers barely stirred. Only the rustle of the silk robe and the elevation of the left eyebrow suggested he was claiming victory.

Churchill cursed. His concentration was broken and nothing more would be achieved that morning. He had lost the battle of the bathrobe. He heaved himself from his bed, scattering papers in his wake, and, ignoring his servant, stomped off in the direction of the bathroom.

It was known as Chequers Court, an age-mellowed manor house constructed of red brick and surrounded by parklands and beech woods in the Chiltern hills, some forty miles to the north-west of London. It was graced by ambitious chimneys, loose windows and a system of heating that, in deference to the ancient timbers, remained totally inadequate. Chequers had once belonged to Mr and Mrs Arthur Lee, who had no children and therefore no lasting use for the property, so in 1921 they had handed it over to the nation complete with all its furniture and fine paintings as a country retreat for whoever was Prime Minister of the day. A year earlier the occupant had been Neville Chamberlain, a proud but inadequate man who remained mercifully unaware that the dogs of misfortune were already on his trail and would soon tear him apart. Calamity had got him first, then cancer, and only six weeks ago they had buried him. Dust to dust. So the keys had been passed to Winston Churchill, who had summoned three generations of his family to spend Christmas with him in his new retreat. It was to be a special occasion, one that everyone present would remember, although, in hindsight, not for all the most comforting reasons.

Sawyers had risen before six that morning to make sure that everything was in proper festive order. The fire in the

Great Hall had been lit, the boilers stoked, the baths run, breakfast served in the bedrooms, the great dinner prepared on a scale that was prodigious. Hitler's U-boat campaign in the Atlantic was supposed to be starving the country into submission, but the German Fuehrer had apparently failed to take into consideration the legendary Mrs Landemare, who was in charge of the Chequers kitchen. She was short, exceedingly stout, and married to a renowned French chef, but her prime loyalty was directed towards the Prime Minister, whose gastronomic demands were notorious. Breakfast was taken in bed and often consisted of chops as well as bacon and a glass of something red, while what followed throughout the day would have left the regulators at the Ministry of Food reeling in horror. There wasn't supposed to be much food around, but Churchill had a lot of good friends, and so did Mrs Landemare. As a consequence the huge bleached wooden table that ran down the centre of the kitchen was now piled high like that of a medieval court. The first course – an entire smoked salmon, half a dozen lobsters and several pots of duck terrine – had been provided by parliamentary colleagues, all anxious to display their loyalty and show off the extent of their country estates. The dessert that sat at the end of the table was a thick-crust pie filled with apples from the orchards at Churt, the home of a previous Prime Minister, David Lloyd George. Churchill's own family home at Chartwell had been the source of most of the fresh vegetables, sent up by train, while as usual Mrs Landemare had made up any shortfall from the contacts she maintained below the stairs of several other country estates. But the pride of place in this year of famine was occupied by the turkey – an enormous beast, sent on the instructions of the dying Viscount Rothermere as one of his last mortal acts, perhaps in repentance for the appalling things his newspapers had often

written about Churchill. It had been plucked, stuffed, basted, and was now roasting under the watchful eye and moist brow of the blessed Mrs Landemare.

‘Unusual large, cook,’ Sawyers had said as he’d watched her thrusting chestnut stuffing deep inside the bird.

Mrs Landemare had given a defiant twirl of her white cap to keep the perspiration from dripping into her eyes. ‘What were you expecting me to give him for his Christmas dinner? Toast? Anyhows, Mr S, we might find there’s even a couple of mouthfuls left over for the likes of us.’

‘Wouldn’t want it to go wasting, cook,’ he’d said. ‘I might even be able to find a bottle of something to go with it, like.’

‘You are a man after my own heart, Mr Sawyers, so you are,’ she had exclaimed, smiling. She didn’t mean it, of course. Sawyers was unmarried and always would be – ‘a gentleman’s gentleman, one of those who lisp to port,’ as she would explain it to friends, ‘but there’s nobody else on God’s earth who can deal with Mr Winston the way that he can.’

And so long as Mr Winston was happy, he wouldn’t miss an occasional bottle. Ah, but as for Mr Randolph, the son, he was altogether another matter . . .

Randolph Churchill, the sole, much-excused and overindulged son of the Prime Minister had been expected to arrive at Chequers the previous evening, Christmas Eve, but a hurried phone call had offered some vague excuse about pressing duties – easy enough to concoct, given his status as an officer in No. 8 Commando and a newly elected Member of Parliament. But Sawyers was sceptical. The younger Churchill hardly ever passed through his constituency and his regiment was notorious for its careless habits; the only landmark Randolph and his fellow officers could be relied upon to hit while on exercise was the officers’ mess. That, in Sawyers’ eye, was not enough to condemn

him – it seemed little more than aristocratic excess, the pampering of the privileged class – but there were other reasons why Sawyers reserved for ‘his master’s little echo’ the contempt that only servants can manage to keep out of sight of others. The first was the man’s spitefulness. It wasn’t for Sawyers to moralize if Randolph decided to spend the night his son was born in the arms of another man’s wife, but to make it so blatantly obvious was unnecessarily cruel. Like burning beetles. And there was a more personal reason. Even after all the years Sawyers had served his father, after the many times he’d been forced to help the son to his bed, take off his soiled clothes, clean up after his excesses, he knew that Randolph didn’t even know his first name. Didn’t care. Wasn’t important. For the younger Churchill, Sawyers was as insignificant and expendable as old orange peel.

He arrived that morning, shortly before his father came down and while the rest of the family including his young wife Pamela was gathered round the log fire, singing carols. He appeared, dark-eyed, dishevelled, and told them he had spent the night on some railway station platform waiting for his train. That was possible, as a matter of fact, but doubtful as a matter of habit. Hardship wasn’t Randolph’s style. But Sawyers would find out where he’d been sleeping, given a few days. The network that operated below the stairs of all fashionable homes – the same one that made up for any shortages in Mrs Landemare’s kitchen – would also make up for any shortcomings in Randolph’s explanation. The man simply didn’t realize that the servants knew. Could tell whether a bed had been slept in, by how many and to what purpose. The telltale signs on a freshly laundered sheet were as clear to a chambermaid’s eye as an elephant’s rump, and if the chambermaid knew, the news would get round the scullery faster than a mouse.

Yet, for the moment, there was harmony. Sawyers stood guard as the family sang their carols, led by the old man, who had a voice that sounded as if it had been broken on a capstan. It was as close as Churchill got nowadays to his son-in-law, Vic Oliver, who was playing the piano. Oliver had never truly been part of the Churchill family scene; he was a music-hall comedian who had been born an Austrian and who was now a naturalized American citizen. It was difficult to count the number of reasons why Churchill held reservations about him: he was brash, he was so much older than Churchill's daughter, Sarah, he had been married twice before. He also preferred to crack jokes for a living when in Churchill's view he should have been cracking German skulls. Oliver used words like 'cute' and 'Britisher'. In retribution, Churchill had given him a copy of Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. But mostly Churchill's antipathy was because of the effect Oliver had on Sarah. She had always been a perfectionist, desperate for applause and approval – it was one of the reasons why she had become an actress – yet she could never persuade herself that she merited any measure of her success. She had rushed into marriage, but it had only caused her sense of inadequacy to grow worse. She was beautiful but fragile, while Oliver was domineering. It had left her limping like a butterfly with a broken wing.

The eldest daughter was Diana. She had the same blue eyes and auburn hair of Sarah, inherited from their father, yet Diana was as reticent as her father was extrovert, as sensitive as he was bullish. When the Churchill family was at play, to most outsiders it seemed as though they were at war, and at such moments Diana would withdraw to the sidelines and wait to tend the casualties. Her husband, Duncan Sandys, was constructed of sterner stuff. He was a Member of Parliament and a colonel on active duty, and she clearly

adored him, but marriage was never an easy option in the Churchill family.

Only Mary, the youngest, seemed completely at ease, more down to earth than any of them, her family path beaten flat by the struggles of those who had gone before. As they exchanged presents, they fussed over Pamela's baby, Churchill's first grandchild, still only ten weeks old, and when it was time for the King's radio broadcast they stood for the National Anthem, then sat on the edge of their seats as they waited for one of his terrible stutters to tangle his words – all except Randolph, who relaxed in the folds of his armchair with a whisky. But His Majesty didn't falter, announcing that his countrymen could look forward to the New Year with sober confidence. Well, some of them, at least.

When the King had finished they were at last released to the dining room. 'Pour the wine, Sawyers!' the old man instructed. As the first dribble of golden liquid fell into his glass, he grabbed the bottle, trying to decipher the label. 'Where are my reading glasses, Sawyers? What have you done with them?'

'I suspect you'll find 'em in yer top pocket.'

'Dammit,' Churchill said, fumbling for his elusive glasses, 'so what is this you're trying to poison us with?'

'An excellent hock. A gift to yer from Mrs Chamberlain. From the late Prime Minister's personal cellar.'

'German, is it?'

'That's right. Given him by an admirer.'

'Ah, one of von Ribbon-top's bottles, I'll be bound.'

'I'll throw it away, then.'

'Steady on, it's a pre-Nazi vintage, I'll say that much for it,' Churchill said, peering at the label. 'A shame to get rid of it before we've had a chance to taste it. So damn the Fuehrer and pour, Sawyers. What are you waiting for, man?'

‘Damn the Fuehrer, zur.’ The servant moved along the table, filling glasses and condemning the Fuehrer at every turn, ignoring the scowls of Clementine who, even after so many years of enduring blasphemy at her table, still insisted on showing her displeasure.

‘And God save us from the bloody Bolsheviks,’ Churchill added, pulling apart a lobster.

A considerable quantity of Mr Chamberlain’s hock had been tested by the time Sawyers brought in the turkey, laid out upon a huge wooden carving dish.

‘A fine specimen, Sawyers,’ Churchill pronounced, nodding at the bird.

‘Indeed, zur.’ The servant sharpened the carving knife as Mrs Landemare and a maid carried in dishes of vegetables.

Randolph took the opportunity to raise his glass in mock salute. ‘*Meleagris gallopavo*. The turkey. About the only useful thing the Americans ever sent us. That and tobacco.’ He swallowed deep. ‘Such a fundamentally useless nation.’

‘Randolph!’ his mother snapped in reproach. ‘You forget. Your grandmother was American.’

‘And we shouldn’t attack those who extend the hand of friendship,’ his father warned, more softly, but the son swirled the green liquid in his glass as though to excite the argument. The rest of them knew what to expect. Sawyers stared in warning at Mrs Landemare and the maid, who vanished like ghosts at dawn.

‘It seems to me a strange sort of friendship, Papa, that ends up with our pockets being picked and our Empire held to ransom.’

‘That is a wholly reprehensible remark.’

‘And holy fact. You know it is. They’ve bled us dry. Filched every last penny from our pockets until we’re practically bankrupt.’

‘Please don’t argue with your father, not today,’ Clementine said, knowing her words would prove entirely useless.

‘Mama, we are penniless. Quite literally. Not a bean.’

‘You always exaggerate, Randolph.’

‘Papa, please tell Mama what happened when you wrote to Roosevelt the other week to tell him our reserves were exhausted.’

Churchill looked in despair at the turkey.

‘Papa, please . . .’ Randolph insisted.

‘Shall I carve, zur?’ Sawyers said, forcing his way into the conversation. ‘A bit o’ leg, Mr Randolph, or do you prefer breast?’

But the younger Churchill was not to be diverted.

‘Mama, we told the President we had next to nothing left, down to our last fifty million in gold. So what did he do, this so-called friend of ours? He sent one of his own destroyers to South Africa to collect the entire bloody lot. He thinks Papa is Santa Claus!’

‘We owed him the money for war matériel. He was in a most difficult position,’ Churchill began defensively. But already Randolph was rushing past him.

‘No, Papa. *We* are in the difficult position. And he takes advantage of us.’

‘He is a great friend.’

‘Gossip on the circuit is he doesn’t even like you.’

‘You may deal in gossip, Randolph, but I must deal in hard facts!’ Churchill responded irritably.

‘And the fact is, Papa, that we’ve paid him every last shekel, and he sends us nothing but junk.’

‘Destroyers. He sends us destroyers,’ Clemmie intervened.

‘Junk!’ Randolph spat. ‘The only ships he sends us are rust buckets from the last war which are so old they’re already obsolete. Do you know, Mama, that before we get them they

have to be officially certified by the US Navy as being useless? And they bloody are.'

'The President has to operate within the laws of his country and under the eye of a sceptical Congress,' Churchill responded. 'His hands are tied.'

'Papa, Papa.' The son raised his own hands in operatic despair. 'The time for excuses is gone. That might have washed while he was running for re-election, but now he's won. Back in the White House for another four years. Roosevelt is tied by nothing but his own timidity.'

'His people do not want war.'

'Our own people don't want war!' Randolph banged the table in anger. 'We seem to have got it nonetheless.'

Churchill chewed on his unlit cigar. As so often, buried in the midst of his son's excess lay an unwholesome chunk of truth, like gristle running through meat. Roosevelt had promised his people peace, had told the mothers of America again and again – and then again – that their boys were not going to be sent to any foreign war. It was politics, of course, democracy at its most base, the lowest common denominator, but there came a point where you judged a man not simply by his words but by his habits. And it worried Churchill more deeply than he cared to admit how the US President had fallen into the habit of ignoring his messages. His silences could no longer be explained away as electoral distraction, that was now gone, the barrier surmounted, yet since the election a few weeks earlier there had been a remarkable chill in the wind that had blown from Washington. Roosevelt hadn't even replied to Churchill's telegram of congratulation, and his debt-collecting methods had come to resemble those of an Irish landlord rather than a Christian friend. And that was the point, for Churchill clung to his view that he was fighting not just for the narrow interests of Britain but on

behalf of a shared cultural tradition that crossed the Atlantic and stretched back two thousand years and more. Yet Roosevelt would have none of it. It seemed America wanted only to be paid.

‘Carve the bloody turkey, Sawyers,’ Churchill said. ‘And let’s pretend it’s Christmas.’

Arguments over lunch were nothing new and Christmas still had many hours to go in the Churchill household, yet it was never fully to recover its spirit. Indeed, the day was eventually to founder completely, ruined by events that had taken place some weeks beforehand and in another part of the world.

The SS *Automedon* had set sail from Liverpool on 24 September 1940, bound for Singapore and Shanghai with a beggar’s muddle of a cargo consisting of crated aircraft, motor cars, machine parts, cigarettes and many cases of whisky. It seemed likely to be an unexceptional voyage.

She wasn’t a ship of much note in anybody’s logbook, a twenty-year-old ocean workhorse with a tall funnel, a single screw and a crew of English officers helped out by mostly Chinese deckhands. By mid-November the *Automedon* was some two hundred and fifty miles off the coast of Sumatra when, late one night, her radio operator picked up a distress call from a Norwegian merchant vessel. The signal said that she was being followed by an unknown ship; a little later the Norwegian reported that she had been stopped, after which – nothing. Total silence. It was a strange incident, but these were strange times and the affair caused more curiosity than concern to the *Automedon*’s Captain Ewan. However, it was enough to ensure that when an unidentified ship appeared at first light some distance off the port bow, Ewan

spent a considerable time peering through his binoculars at the vessel. The stranger was flying a Dutch flag, innocent enough, and Ewan could see what looked like women hanging out washing on lines stretched across the foredeck. She was drawing slowly closer. McEwan concluded that the vessel was a friendly merchantman, much like dozens of others the *Automedon* had passed since leaving Liverpool.

They were on parallel courses and only a couple of thousand yards apart when the new vessel suddenly increased speed and identified herself as the German raider *Atlantis*. At the same moment, she fired a warning shot across Ewan's bow. He had been duped. He immediately ordered his radio operator to send a distress signal, so the *Atlantis* began to pour round after round into the *Automedon* in a desperate attempt to prevent the signal being completed and her location discovered. The German assault was totally successful. After being hit twenty-eight times in less than three minutes, the *Automedon* lay listing and defenceless, her radio silenced, her captain killed on his bridge and her fate entirely unknown to the wider world. The Kriegsmarine had claimed one more victim.

The *Automedon* was a small ship, little more than seven thousand tons, yet in time her loss was to change the course of the war. Indeed, in time, it would change the world.

None of this was known to the Churchills when, around midnight, they gathered in the Long Gallery, a room filled with the smell of smoke and old books that stretched along the north front of Chequers to form its library. That night, behind its blackout curtains, it had been transformed into a makeshift cinema.

'You shall sit beside me, Pamela,' Churchill said to his daughter-in-law, patting the seat next to him on the sofa

while the others searched around to find themselves comfortable perches, all except for Clemmie, a most reluctant participant in any of her husband's late-night frolics, who had long since bidden them farewell and departed for her bed.

'A special treat for Christmas,' Churchill told Pamela, as Sawyers erected the screen and fussed over the projector. 'There is a friend of mine, Mr Alexander Korda, a Hungarian who makes very fine films. He and I are much alike. He loves cigars. He is often broke. And he is always impeccably dressed.'

Pamela wanted to giggle. She doubted if Mr Korda had gravy stains running down the lapels of his jacket.

'He has sent me his most recent work,' her father-in-law continued. 'It's not yet been released to the public. It's about Horatio Nelson. I've even given Mr Korda some advice on the matter – oh, just a few words here and there to place in the admiral's mouth.' He waved his brandy glass in a simulation of modesty, and began to address her as though she were a public audience. 'You know, at the opening of the last century when Napoleon's armies dominated the continent, the people in these islands of ours fought on alone for many years. At times it seemed impossible that they should prevail, until Nelson rallied them to the cause. Now it seems that history wishes to repeat its great cycle, and once more we search for our Nelson.'

'Some of us think we've already found him,' she replied, smiling and taking his soft hand.

His eyes began to mist. 'You know, my dear, you are a most unusual pearl. I shall never know how Randolph found you, let alone persuaded you to marry him.'

Perhaps it was better that the old man never knew. The truth was that Randolph had picked Pamela up on a blind date and proposed to her the following night. Married six weeks later, just as war had broken out. It was only afterwards that

she discovered she was the eighth woman he'd pursued with the prospect of marriage in less than a month. Oh, it was one of those things that happened in wartime. For young soldiers such as Randolph, war had a brutal simplicity. They expected to die, so every long night, every available woman, was taken as their last. They didn't so much embrace the moment as grab it in both hands, and in the rush the common standards and decencies were often thrown to one side. But the British were ridiculously inept at the soldierly traditions of rape and pillage, so instead they hurried to churches and register offices, hoping to find in their marriage beds something that was worth fighting and dying for.

But Randolph hadn't died. He was there in an armchair, picking his nose and demanding another drink from the ubiquitous Sawyers. Yet for all his shortcomings he had introduced her to a new world that took her breath away. Eighteen months ago Pamela had been an unsophisticated teenager from rural Dorset with nothing more on her mind than flower arranging and the occasional midnight fumble with a taxi tiger; now she found herself at the epicentre of a war. When she had first met Randolph, his father had been an outsider, distrusted by his colleagues and despised by many, yet now he was the Prime Minister, and that made everyone in the family a target. He'd warned them all. If the Germans invaded, he had told them, they should fight to the very end. 'With bullets, with bayonets,' he had declared.

'But, Papa,' she had said, 'I don't know how to use a gun.'

'Then go to the kitchen and find a carving knife! You know how to use a carving knife, don't you, woman?'

He could be such a little boy at times. Perhaps that was why they got on so well. They could both still enjoy the enthusiasms of being children, she because she hadn't yet grown up, and he because in some ways he never would.

‘Enough time-wasting, Sawyers,’ he now told the valet.
‘Out with the bottle and on with the show!’

‘It’s on table beside yer.’

‘What is?’

‘Yer brandy.’

‘Ah, what a charming coincidence. Then what are you waiting for?’

Lights were switched off until there was nothing but the glow of the wood-stoked fire and the flickering of the film. Soon they were immersed in the tale of Nelson and his mistress, Emma Hamilton, a dancer and woman of questionable virtue who came to captivate the warrior’s heart. The actress was Vivien Leigh.

‘She is extraordinarily beautiful,’ Churchill whispered in Pamela’s ear. ‘So very much like you.’

Beside her on the sofa, Pamela felt the old man melt as England was shown friendless, alone, its armed forces denied supplies, with nothing to eat, a country fighting for its survival and little other than one man’s determination to keep it from succumbing. Yet, as Emma pointed out, England seemed so insignificant, ‘just a tiny little bit’ on the globe compared with the might of the enemy that had spread so far across the map of Europe. Her eyes lit up with wonder as she was told in reply: ‘. . . there are always men who, for the sake of their insane ambition, want to destroy what other people have built. And therefore this “tiny little bit” has to send out its ships again and again to fight those who want to dictate their will to others.’

Pamela felt her hand being squeezed with almost painful force as the words showered from the screen upon Churchill. She knew they were the words that he had written.

So the images flickered and the ships went out once more to confront the European tyrant, willing to be blown to bits

in the hope that the enemy would be pulverized to even smaller pieces. England expected it of them. Then Nelson, mortally wounded at the moment of his supreme triumph, paid the price that freedom so often demands.

‘Thank God I have done my duty,’ he gasped, his words melting into the strains of ‘Rule Britannia’ and shouts of victory from those Englishmen who had survived.

In the glow of the firelight, Pamela could see tears streaming down the old man’s face. They were still there when the last foot of film had passed through the gate and was clattering around its reel.

‘That is how I should like to die,’ Churchill whispered. ‘Such a fine ending.’

She knew he was being completely sincere.

He disappeared into the folds of a huge silk handkerchief. Pamela decided it would be ungracious to point out that he’d noticed only the Boy’s-Own bits of the film and that the final moments had concerned themselves not with the glories of Nelson’s death but with the demise many years later of Emma as an ageing alcoholic sprawled piteously on the wet cobbles of some foreign port. It wasn’t just the men who paid a price in war.

The clocks had long since chimed two. Sawyers damped down the fire. The filmgoers were stretching their legs and preparing to depart for bed when, from somewhere in the distance, the sound of a motor-car engine carried on the frozen night air. Churchill suddenly grew still. A change came over him, like a dog sensing danger that he couldn’t yet identify. But a motor car meant a new message, and on this day and at this time of night, the message could mean only one thing.

Disaster.

* * *

‘Couldn’t it wait?’ the old man enquired, his voice beginning to rasp with fatigue and anxiety. But he already knew the answer. Sir Stewart Menzies, known simply as ‘C’ in the corridors of power, was the head of Churchill’s Secret Intelligence Service. It made him one of the most powerful men in the country; he hadn’t dropped by at two in the morning simply for the large whisky and cold grate that greeted him in the Hawtrey Room.

‘I’m sorry, Prime Minister.’ Churchill’s spymaster unlocked a briefcase and extracted a slim manila folder, which he placed on the table and smoothed open. ‘You won’t have heard of the *Automedon*, I suspect. No reason why you should. But it’s been sunk by the Nazis.’

Churchill glared defiantly, waiting for the bullet to strike him.

‘It happened last month, on her way to Singapore. Small cargo of car bits, cigarettes, whisky, that sort of thing.’

‘I suspect the distilleries will be able to resupply them,’ Churchill responded slowly, hoping words might quell the sense of unease that was rising up his gullet.

‘She was boarded before she was sunk, several of her crew killed, including the captain, and the rest captured and taken to the Japanese port of Kobe. They were disembarked in Kobe while waiting to be loaded onto another German ship. That’s when one of our agents managed to speak briefly to members of the crew. We’ve been able to confirm their identity and . . .’ – he paused, steadying himself – ‘we have no reason to disbelieve their story.’

‘Which is?’

‘While the German boarding party was on board the *Automedon*, they discovered the ship’s safe in the strong room. They blew it open. Got everything inside it. Decoding tables, maps of harbour defences, minefields, intelligence reports, the lot.’

‘Such material is the currency of war. This surely amounts to little more than loose change.’

But Menzies was shaking his head. ‘That’s not it, I’m afraid. While they were making their tour of the ship, they also found the body of an Admiralty courier. Beside him was one of our security bags. It seems he was in the process of throwing it overboard when . . . Well, he didn’t make it. Neither did the bag.’

Churchill knew of these bags. Green canvas, with brass eyelets to allow the water in and lead weights sewn inside to ensure that the bag and its contents sank quickly to the bottom of the ocean. The couriers were instructed to defend these bags with their lives. The courier on the *Automedon* appeared to have done precisely that.

‘It seems,’ Menzies said slowly, as if every word had suddenly become a burden, ‘that inside the pouch was a letter addressed to Brooke-Popham.’ The name needed no elaboration. Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham was the British Commander-in-Chief, Far East, based in Singapore. His was one of the most sensitive and difficult commands anywhere in the Empire.

‘Usual routine for top secret material,’ Menzies continued. ‘Instructions that it be opened by no other hand et cetera et cetera.’ He sipped at his whisky, but appeared to find no enjoyment in it. His lips were tightly pursed. ‘When the German ship reached Japan, the letter apparently found its way to the German Ambassador in Tokyo – we have that from intercepts – and he in turn handed it on to Kondo.’

‘Kondo?’

‘The Vice Chairman of the Japanese Imperial Naval General Staff.’

Churchill stared into the cold, empty hearth. ‘And what did the letter contain?’

‘It was . . . dear God, I think you’ll remember it, Prime Minister.’ Menzies sighed, his shoulders falling in discouragement. ‘A copy of the analysis drawn up by our Chiefs of Staff on our ability to defend ourselves in the Far East in the event that the Japanese declare war on us.’

Churchill froze. He did not stir for many moments, but the glass in his hand tilted as his fingers seemed to lose all sensation. The only sound in the room was the slow dripping of whisky onto the carpet.

Eventually a tremor came to his lips. ‘What on earth was it doing on a tramp steamer like the *Automedon*?’

‘It’s a tangled little tale,’ Menzies said, finding comfort now that he would be able to offload the burden – and, with it, much of the blame – onto other shoulders. ‘Apparently the War Office didn’t want the paper to get to Singapore too quickly – not in the middle of the difficult negotiations with the Australians – you know what’s been happening. They’ve been pestering us with demands for more and more British reinforcements to be sent to the Far East, while we’ve been insisting that there is no real need. So apparently it was felt that the paper would only . . . How can I put it?’

‘Complicate the situation.’

‘Precisely.’

‘They decided to cover their arses,’ Churchill growled. ‘They would send it, but so slowly that by the time it arrived it might be buried in obsolescence. Of no use to – and no blame upon – anyone.’

‘I think that’s a reasonably accurate summary, yes. They also wanted to get it to Singapore in a manner that would arouse no suspicion. So they . . .’

‘Put it on a rust bucket.’

‘That seems to be about the measure of it, Prime Minister. I’m so very sorry.’

But Churchill was no longer listening. His face was flushed with both anger and anguish as his mind cast back to the contents of the paper that he himself had commissioned. It ran to seventy-eight closely argued paragraphs and came to one damning conclusion – a conclusion so devastating that he had refused to allow it to be discussed even by his War Cabinet.

Churchill leant forward, as though wanting to spring at the other man, fixing him in the eye. ‘The Japanese have it? You are sure?’

His stare was returned.

‘On the basis of what we know, it seems all but certain.’

‘Then may God preserve us.’

The Chiefs of Staff had concluded that the British couldn’t beat the Japanese. Not a chance, not on their own. Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, all the territories and possessions of the British in the Far East, the jewels of their Empire, were virtually defenceless. Waiting to be plundered.

And the Japanese knew it.

A little later, as Churchill climbed the stairs to bed, he found himself accompanied by an unfamiliar and deeply troubling sensation. Only in the middle of the night, when he was still struggling to sleep, did he finally recognize the ruffian.

It was fear.