

AN INVITATION TO HITLER

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CHAPTER ONE

He left his driver and bodyguard by the cottage. They knew he wanted to be alone and let him walk away unaccompanied. Here, of all places, he should be safe – deep in the garden of England, where an assassin or a landing party would stand out against the tableau of the age-old landscape. Still wearing drab army battledress from his earlier engagements of the day, the solitary figure walked slowly past the redbrick country house, barely glancing up at its fine gabled walls. Until recently so welcoming, it now stood closed and shuttered – an appropriate symbol, he mused, for the country at this perilous time.

He walked on past the terrace, the gravel crunching beneath his feet, until he reached the edge of the garden. For a few moments he hesitated, looking around and quietly absorbing the sadness of its current neglect... the flower beds unkempt and weed-strewn; the once-manicured lawns almost meadow-like. He counted out the months... eight, nearly nine, since he had left this place and moved back to London. Nature had moved quickly to reclaim ground no longer tended.

A hundred yards further on, Churchill came to a stop on a sunlit, grassy bank by the lakeside. So often over the years he had come to this special place to enjoy the tranquil scene, the calls of the wild birds and the rustling of water through the sedges. On this glorious

June afternoon, however, there was no such pleasure. Instead, he could only stand and watch sadly as the lake's last waters drained away. So painstakingly constructed just fifteen years ago, it had been deemed too recognisable a landmark from the air and had to be expunged.

Earlier that morning a squad of Canadian engineers had arrived to prepare the execution. Cordoning off the area, they surveyed the earth and stone construction to select a suitable spot from where an out-flowing torrent would do least damage, directed well away from house and garden. They drilled a hole deep into the retaining wall and inserted a few ounces of plastic explosive, just sufficient to make an effective breach while minimising the damage to the surrounding structure. Retiring a safe distance, they detonated the charge and watched with quiet satisfaction as the lake began to empty itself along the intended channel. Tomorrow they would return to finish the task, to plant on the drying bed the shrubs and trees that were already stacked nearby in hessian sacks. Within a few weeks the recently visible contours of the lake would blend back into the green countryside, the work of camouflage complete.

The engineers had completed their task professionally, without emotion, a small diversion from their routine of technical classes and weapons drill. For Churchill, arriving on the scene a few hours later, it was different. This was *his* lake. He had created it, had planned it here in the secluded eastern acres of the estate. He had measured out its perimeter and checked the levels with the greatest of care, then supervised the men over the months as they excavated the ground and raised the banks, helping out from time to time with the brick and stone laying. With the long work of construction finally complete, he had watched with a deep glow of satisfaction on the day the waters from the Chart Well began to fill it, giving it life. When it settled he had planted freshwater weeds and rushes, then stocked the new-born lake with trout and carp. He had maintained it over the years with diligence, perhaps even love, enjoying it immensely as it came to life with fish and waterfowl, and gradually

merged into the landscape until it looked as if it had been there for centuries. He had painted by its banks, catching all its seasons and moods, and paced by it for hours at a time, deep in thought.

Now it was gone, an unsung casualty of the conflagration. Only a few muddy puddles remained, and in them a few carp, flapping about in their death throes. For all the carnage, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, the mass destruction of cities and towns throughout Europe – for all of that, the demise of this small lake and the plight of its few poor fish brought a tear to his eye.

He stood quietly for a moment, his mind churning, feeling the pressure from the dozens of issues confronting him until, just as the blackness threatened to enfold him, he sensed the evening sun begin to warm his face. He steadied himself. His words to the House a few days earlier echoed in his mind and gave him sustenance. He spoke them aloud, across the ravaged site.

We shall never surrender!

He turned his back on the emptied lake and walked towards the garden, still moving slowly but now taking time to look around. For all the obvious lack of care the wonderful charm of the place still endured... the familiar shapes and shades, the aromas, and in the background the comforting sounds of country life. Slowly he felt his spirits start to lift. Along the lower path the azaleas and the roses were in bloom, the scent from the flowers almost overwhelming in the early summer warmth. He lifted his eyes from the untidy palette of colours in the beds and looked over to the long curtain wall built a decade ago, much of it with his own hands. For a few, almost sensual moments he enjoyed the splendour of the scene, as the late afternoon sun brought out the lustre in the brick, bathing the garden in a warm, russet light.

He relished this small island of peace in an unpeaceful world. Those glorious views across the Weald of Kent, the very finest of English countryside, meant so much to him, reminding him of what the struggle was ultimately about – freedom, peace, prosperity. Almost a thousand years had passed since an invader had last come

this way, and the passing time had left the land matured, gracefully aged. For countless generations it had been nurtured by yeomen of England, who had toiled and cared for their holdings without fearing the ravages of the next passing horde.

It was here in this lush corner of the country that he had chosen to make a home for his family, a haven from politics and the bustle of daily life in London. For almost twenty years it had served that purpose admirably, as Clementine and he slowly adapted to the country life and their children grew to adulthood. Closing his eyes for just a few seconds brought back pleasant memories: bright spring days gardening or painting; crisp autumn days engaged in building work around the grounds and, most of all, long summer evenings relaxing with friends, enjoying both their company and the good-humoured debates that often developed.

But there had been serious purpose here as well. Far away from the treadmill of London, he was able to marshal his thoughts on the national issues of the day as he went about the work of the estate. In the midst of all the physical activity he found an oasis for concentration, where he could assimilate the latest news from the Continent, mull over the opinions of others he respected, and contemplate parallels from history. Then, most evenings, after dinner with Clemmy or friends he would retire upstairs to his study, there to pen the articles and speeches that had tried to alert his countrymen to the threat posed by Hitler.

His 'wilderness' years, some called them, and he often smiled at the irony.

Wilderness! Here... in this verdant place? This nursery of fauna and flora... this seedbed of political manifestos!

He knew that history would be the judge. But whichever perspective was accurate, his idyll was not to last. Peace, hard-won through the 'war to end wars', had been fervent desire of many. But, sadly, not of all. Across Europe the sound of jackboots began to echo, first in alleyways, then in wide streets, and finally across great squares... Rome... Berlin... Vienna... The thunder was increasing, and it be-

came clear that events on the Continent were drifting ominously back towards war. To his great dismay, he had watched his own government vacillate in the face of Nazism, temporising and seeking compromise. With his incisive mind and great power of oratory, Churchill became the leader and the voice of those opposed to the appeasement. The discussions in his country house had moved on from Socratic debate about the threats to democracy posed by Bolshevism and Fascism to the hard practicality of fighting Hitler and his apologists. Far from being a refuge, Chartwell became instead the centre of political opposition.

It was now nine long months into the war and, to his great regret, his visits here were rare. Today's had been finessed into the schedule on the way back to London from a tour of beach defences, some less than thirty miles from where he stood. He was glad of the short break in his gruelling programme and the few minutes of sanctuary afforded in the garden. Realistically he knew that he would not be able to spend much time here in his beloved Chartwell in the months and probably years to come. The demands on his time, since the outbreak of war as a member of Chamberlain's Cabinet, and now as Prime Minister, were just too heavy. Even as a place of occasional retreat the house did not serve well. Its very position, elevated above the surrounding countryside, which made for those heart-warming views, also made it far too visible to the Luftwaffe's pilots. They would be sure to see it, and him, as prime targets in the brutal conflict.

He started to head back towards the cottage, passing again by the great house. In the courtyard stood a makeshift bomb shelter: squat, almost obscene. He glared at it as he walked past, knowing that, for all its ugliness, it offered little protection against the munitions now in use. Dealing with it would be the first item on his list when this damned war was over. A few yards further on he came to the foot of the steps down from the French windows. He paused and looked round to the side of the flight. The scowl left his face and

a wistful smile appeared. His eyes were focused on a small stack of bricks, still resting where he had left them almost a year ago. He sighed, pondering on how much had happened since he had last put down his trowel and finished, as he had thought, for the day. Bending down he lifted a paver from the top of the pile and turned it over in his hands, caressing its rough clay surface.

He was desperately worried. His calls over the years for the country to ready itself had been clear and cogent, but he knew that he had been only marginally successful. Few of his countrymen and, amongst politicians, neither friends nor opponents had wanted to listen. Less than twenty years after the First World War, and all its horrors, there were few indeed who would allow themselves to countenance a renewal of that conflict. Surely no-one who had lived through that maelstrom of blood and steel, trenches and mud, bayoneting and gas could allow it to happen again. Reason, they assumed, would prevail in Germany, as in England.

Eventually, but much too late, people had realised that reason did not prevail when it came to Nazi Germany. That nation's hatred of war had been replaced by a hatred of defeat. The humiliation of Versailles and the debilitating depression that followed had outweighed the painful memories. New leaders had arisen who carried deep within them a lust for revenge against the countries, and the race, seen as responsible. Chamberlain and Halifax had tried valiantly, but naively and ultimately in vain to negotiate and compromise with Hitler. It had all been to no avail. Perhaps the year's breathing space between the doomed Munich Agreement and the outbreak of war had allowed for some improvement in Britain's defences; but not nearly enough. No one would ever know whether a stronger stance at an earlier time would have caused the man to stop before he had acquired the taste of victory; before his generals had demonstrated the superiority of their soldiers and weaponry to those of the democratic countries.

It was too late now. He placed the brick back on top of the stack and walked on along the terrace, his thoughts moving to the present

dire situation. The ‘Phoney War,’ they were calling it just a month ago. Not phoney for the hundreds of civilians drowned on the SS *Athenia*, or the thousand sailors lost on HMS *Royal Oak*, although compared to the hell of the last few weeks... Denmark and Norway, Holland and Belgium, and now France!

That the neutrals had been overwhelmed by the German juggernaut did not surprise him – but that the combined armies of Britain and France, nearly a hundred and forty divisions, could be smashed in a matter of weeks by Hitler’s panzers... He shuddered. *Thank God for the deliverance at Dunkirk.*

A deliverance certainly, but also, by any measure, a disaster. The weapons and equipment of the British Expeditionary Force, the prime of the Army, lay strewn across the fields and dunes of northern France. The RAF had lost hundreds of aircraft, shot down or abandoned at dusty airfields; dozens of destroyers and small craft had been sunk during the evacuation. Now, just two weeks later, the Battle of France was almost over. The remnants of the French army were still hanging on in the south of their country against fierce German pressure, but he knew from his last meeting with their leaders that it would be only a matter of days, a week at most, before they capitulated. Their famous élan was all but extinguished. *Then Britain alone would fly the flag of freedom in Europe.*

He took a deep breath as he contemplated the enormity of the challenge. Then he paused, steadied himself, and tried to focus on his lush surroundings. The sun was setting lower now, and for a brief moment he was able to indulge himself, enjoying the rich colours and sounds of the countryside. In the middle distance he could hear cattle low as their milking time drew near, while in the high branches of a nearby elm tree a blackbird was loudly proclaiming its tenancy. Around his head dozens of bees pirouetted noisily. He smiled at their furious activity, untroubled by the world, as they ferried nectar from the shrubs on the terrace down to the hives in the lower garden.

Then, indistinct to begin with but gradually becoming audible

above their drone, he heard a different sound – the distinctive tone of a Merlin engine bringing a sharp injection of reality to his cloistered setting. He looked up and, far above, could just make out a solitary aircraft straining for height as it headed east towards the Channel. A Spitfire, no doubt, on a reconnaissance mission. A lone, brave pilot setting out for the final check of the day on the French ports. It was a poignant reminder of where the photographs came from that appeared on his desk each morning. For just a moment the sun glinted on its wings. Silently he wished the pilot Godspeed, and watched and listened until the aircraft disappeared from view, its engine note faded away and, gently but persistently, the sound of the bees regained the ascendancy.

He looked at his pocket watch. It was nearly six o'clock, the time when in those not so distant days he would have been finishing up work for the evening, before heading to the house to wash and dress for dinner. He found himself half-listening for the church bell in Westerham village to ring out the hour. On this day no sound came from the tower. Instead, its deafening silence rang out a different message: *England was waiting.*

It was time to go; there was much work still to be done in Whitehall. He headed back towards the garden cottage where his companions had waited, stretching out the small talk over a pot of tea. Coming in from the light he saw a young woman watering the geraniums in the porch. He hesitated. The woman had her back turned to him, but he knew it was Jessie, his housekeeper. He had spoken to her just a few days ago on hearing the sad news that her brother, Ted, had been killed at Dunkirk; one of the brave rearguard who had held off the German advance so that the mass of the defeated army could make its escape to England. A fine young man. He remembered him well.

“Good evening, Mr Churchill.” She turned and greeted him, in a warm but subdued voice.

“Evening, Jessie. I thought those were looking a bit dried up.” It

was easier to talk about the withered plants than the sadness that enveloped her.

“They are.” She continued watering. “I’m afraid they weren’t seen to last week... while I was off helping my mother.”

“That’s understandable.” He paused for a moment, then lowered his voice. “How is she?”

“Bearing up, sir. She’s been through it before.” The words cut through him. He recalled that Jessie’s father had been killed in the First World War, at the Somme, leaving behind a widow and the two infants. He struggled for the right expression, but could only grunt sympathetically before gently making his way past her into the kitchen.

“Time to be on our way, gentlemen,” he said quietly, not really wanting to leave but conscious of the tasks that remained to be done that evening. As they rose to go, he turned again to the young woman and took her hand.

“Goodbye, Jessie. Please give my deep condolences to your mother. It’s hard to offer any consolation at a time like this, but you should both know that Ted’s sacrifice, and his comrades’, may have saved the country.”

He looked at her. He saw the tears welling in her eyes, and heard her voice falter as she struggled to reply.

“I will, Mr. Churchill. Thank you. And may God’s blessing be with you too, sir. We’re all depending on you now.”