

It was pure Winston.

That was how Jock Colville put it the next morning, and he was right, it was. The Prime Minister had been on sparkling form. One moment the old boy was mischievous in his mockery, a note he particularly liked to strike, the next he was giving them one of his witty little history lessons, before lifting them all with his sober yet hopeful finale. Nor did Clementine, who was usually the first to see the way the wind was blowing, spot anything amiss. He was sailing confidently along, holding the assembled company in the palm of his hand, before reaching (in that characteristic fashion) for his glass to toast the Italians.

In their long and tumultuous life together Clementine had sat and smiled through a thousand such speeches, a thousand such humorous moments, a thousand little history lessons, not to mention a few sections of his memorably stirring oratory in which he managed to be both gloomy *and* uplifting, halting *and* spontaneous. Of course she longed for his speech to be over and the guests to be gone so that they could go upstairs to bed. Indeed, to be honest, she longed for everything to be over: all of it, the whole caboodle, the travelling circus, the Cabinet meetings and the Commons clashes, the public pomp and the private wranglings, the exhausting, protracted, all-consuming business of politics.

It was time to move over, time to move on. It was time to make way for Anthony Eden, dear Anthony, long past time in fact. But as her practised eye picked up the expressions around the table, in particular the awed faces of Signor De Gasperi and the Italian legation, she admitted to herself, for the thousandth time, albeit with rather bitter pride, that no one, not even now, could do this sort of thing better than her husband.

Confident that he could bring the ship safely into harbour without any further need to peer at his written notes, Winston took off his glasses. With all his pre-speech nerves gone, and the grumpiness that attended them, he could now bathe in his persuasive cadences and indulge in his perfectly shaped sentences.

Loyal listener though she was, Lady Churchill would have been the first to admit that – at her age and particularly at such functions – her attention was prone to wander just a little, so here is how her husband drew to his conclusion that night in 10 Downing Street, the night of 23 June 1953:

‘And so, Signor De Gasperi, in drinking to your health, and to that of the whole Italian nation, I am mindful that only twice in our long and eventful history have these islands of ours ever been conquered. Only twice. But I have to tell you that we British have long memories. In 55 BC’ – here he allowed himself a dramatic pause, an allowance a second too long – ‘in 55 BC, as every British schoolboy knows, we were conquered for the first time. By the Romans.’

The Italians laughed and conceded the point. *Si, si, è vero.* To which the Prime Minister, enjoying the playful banter, responded with his puckish grin:

‘The Romans conquered Britain, yes, but our conquerors built not only Roman cities and Roman roads and a Roman Wall, but a better way. There was law; there was order; there was peace; there was warmth; there was food, and a population free from barbarism without being sunk into sloth or luxury, beyond the luxury of a hot Roman bath, of which, throughout my long and not uneventful life, I have (as my wife will confirm) partaken twice a day.’

Signor De Gasperi bowed his head to acknowledge this praise of his nation’s distant imperial past, an Italian past much prouder than the country’s more recent history, while Lady Churchill smiled and nodded her confirmation of Winston’s well-established bathing routine. Yes, he did love being in his tub, having a soak, and he always filled it to the brim.

‘And when, five centuries later, the Roman legions finally set sail back for the warm Mediterranean, they left behind a land transfigured. The fragile civilisation of Britain, set on the fringes of the mighty Roman Empire, grew from strength to strength, until in the fullness of time, the *British* Empire, as the Roman Empire had once been, became the most powerful on earth.’

And this is where the Prime Minister took off his glasses and put down his notes.

‘But while allowing ourselves briefly to peer back across the gulf of nearly two thousand years we must, in these

feverish and precarious days of 1953, lose no opportunity to ease the difficulties which at present divide and bedevil the world. For in this Atomic Age we have the power to blow ourselves to pieces in a matter of months, if not minutes. In modern Europe, perilously riven as it is, *all* countries must cast off fear and make the proper use of their gifts to benefit mankind. That will be the spirit in which I shall sail next week to Bermuda ... sail in HMS *Vanguard* ... next week ... to Ber-mu-da to meet with President Eisenhower, so strong is my desire to achieve a summit and a generation of peace with Soviet Russia ... in these post-Stalin days.

‘And in that spirit, in the spirit of hope, I ask everyone to rise ... I give you Signor De Gap ... Signor De Gas ... And the nation of ...’

Smiling purposefully as he slipped round behind the long dining room table, his face an unflappable mask, Jock Colville was the first to be at the Prime Minister’s side. As the table rose and raised their glasses, he had seen Sir Winston land heavily back on his seat. As the table went up the Prime Minister went down. Colville had also seen Churchill’s head very slowly slump to the right.

He leant over his shoulder, whispering:

‘Prime Minister? Are you all right?’

‘What?’

‘A glass of water perhaps?’

‘Am – I?’

‘It’s very hot in here, isn’t it? Stifling. Shall we open a window?’

Churchill's fingers waved in the general direction of his notes.

'How – did – it . . . ?'

'The speech went very well. Some lovely touches. They absolutely lapped it up.'

The Prime Minister stared at him as if at a fool.

'Lapped?'

Clementine was now at his other side. She gripped his arm, trying to adjust his position on the seat, trying to re-settle him as if all was normal.

'Winston? What is it?'

'How – how – did . . . ?'

'Shall I get him some water? There's none in his glass.'

'No, get Charles here. Immediately!'

'Of course.'

'Don't say anything, Jock. Not a word to anyone.'

'Of course not.'

'And do your best to get Signor De Gasperi and the guests to leave. As soon as possible, and above all we don't want any murmuring.'

'There won't be.'

'Minimum fuss.'

'Absolutely.'

'Nothing for the papers.'

'Of course not.'

'And ring Charles.'

The Prime Minister, pale and heavy, slowly tilted his face towards his wife, essaying a smile.

'Cat?'

‘Yes, Winston?’

‘How – did – it . . .?’

‘Don’t fret about all that. It was perfect. You must lie down, that’s all. You’re over-tired. You can’t say I didn’t warn you, but you won’t listen, will you?’

‘Lie? Where?’

‘And one thing is certain. This puts an end to that ridiculous Bermuda business. I’ve never heard such nonsense.’

Jock Colville was now out of the room, doing as he was bidden, but Charles Moran, just when you most needed him, was not answering his telephone.

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Charles McMoran Wilson – Lord Moran since 1943 – bustled in, Gladstone bag in hand, only to find his way blocked by the Prime Minister’s secretary.

‘Ah, Charles, you’re here.’

There are, as they say, ways and ways of saying things, and the way young Jock Colville said the four words ‘Ah, Charles, you’re here’ grated with the old doctor. It grated quite a lot. Indeed, he would go further: it made him dyspeptic. Coming from Northern Irish stock, and with a Yorkshire grammar school education, Moran did not take kindly at the best of times – and these were not the best of times – to the languid voice of this smooth young diplomat, his public school tones textured with practised implication, the implication being that with just a little more effort and despatch the President of the Royal College of Physicians could have been at the Prime

Minister's bedside some hours earlier. In fact, you could argue that the smooth young diplomat was sending a stiff message and not a million miles off saying to the austere old stick, 'And where the hell have you been?'

'I was out to dinner last night. In Sussex.'

'Ah, that would explain it.'

'In Horsham.'

'In *Horsham*? *Were* you?'

The affected disbelief with which Colville pronounced *Horsham*, suggesting it could as well have been Hackney or Honolulu, was more than enough for the dyspeptic Moran, who barked back,

'Is he in bed?'

Indeed he was, but Colville allowed himself a second or two before saying,

'Mrs Churchill would like you to call on her when you've finished, if you wouldn't mind.'

'Mind? Why should I?'

Not batting an eyelid, Colville half raised a conciliatory palm.

'It's just that she feels very strongly that—'

'Of course I'll see her. I always do.'

Colville nodded and his highly polished shoes took a few paces to one side, as if conceding that Moran had now, after due and careful consideration of all the circumstances, been granted access to the inner circle.

'Thank you. Do go through.'

But Lord Moran did not go through. He put his medical bag huffily down on a chair. He would go through when he

was bloody ready to go through and not one minute before, and certainly not at the beck and call of Jock Colville.

The telephone had rung at his home in Hassocks just before midnight. Dorothy was beside him in bed – they were both reading – but even before he had put down his cocoa and picked up his spectacles Lord Moran felt a prickle of apprehension. The telephone, nearly always, was trouble. Winston trouble. Only Number 10 would contact him at so late an hour. Not that the girl on the exchange would add much to the basic facts, oh no, she was far too well trained for that, she simply repeated the request that Lord Moran attend the Prime Minister at nine in the morning.

There was a dog howling somewhere and Moran hardly slept a wink. He saw that June dawn breaking at 3.45 and he banged his head on the pillow and shut his eyes tight for the fiftieth time. But it was no good, he was up at 4.55 and pacing around the kitchen in rather a stew. And even after the earliest of starts on the road it had been a difficult drive up to town, part of which was spent recalling the numerous medical crises in his patient's life, or 'hurdles' as Winston preferred to call them.

And hurdles there had been aplenty. Each episode was stamped on Moran's mind; each struggle to keep the old carcass going had been stressful. There had been the Prime Minister's pneumonia in 1943, starting with a heavy cold in Algiers and exacerbated by a long flight in a freezing bomber; there had been the slight stroke he suffered in Monte Carlo in 1949, and the heart scare in

New York; then there were the sudden depressions, the black dogs; and the diverticulitis, not to mention the numerous lesser ailments, the palpitations, the conjunctivitis and the throat problems, the wobbly legs, the giddy spells, the promises to give up smoking, the tingly fingers, the swelling in his groin, the rupture and all that humiliating worry over whether or not to wear a truss.

Twelve years and still counting Lord Moran had spent looking after Winston. Twelve years in war and in peace, twelve years in office and out of office, day in day out, twelve years trying to keep the cigar alight, with an increasing number of pills (the reds and the whites) and capsules and sachets, and even then he could never tell whether or not the old boy was played out. Quite simply, he was not like other men. One day you thought it was all up with him and he looked about to keel over, only to find him later that night, brandy in hand, holding court in Chartwell, when no power on earth could stop him singing 'A Wandering Minstrel, I', or 'Lily of Laguna'.

And here the old doctor, who had spent three long years of his youth in the trenches, was being patronised by Master Jock Colville, who only found himself in Number 10 and doing what he was doing because he was related to everyone from the Queen down and connected to everyone else; and, of course, he had gone to the same school as WSC, to wit, Harrow.

Looking at Colville now, and trying to overcome his distaste, Moran could not ever imagine the Prime Minister's secretary slapping a golf ball down the fairway

or making a try-saving tackle at rugger. It was clear from the briefest assessment that Colville would never have made any school team picked by Moran, let alone been considered for one of his St Mary's Hospital sides. Touch judge at best.

'Were you actually watching?' Moran asked the touch judge.

'Watching?'

'When it happened.'

'No, we were all on our feet, toasting the Italians. Something of a new experience.'

The doctor looked blank. Had he missed some private joke? If so, it wouldn't be for the first time. Moran found he rarely 'got' jokes, so he did not join in group laughter. Nor did he sing dirty rugger songs, and unsurprisingly (given all this) he had never been considered a good mixer.

'What was new about the experience?'

'Toasting the Italians.'

'Not with you, I'm afraid.'

'Our brave allies in the war? Never mind. The Italian delegation were our guests at dinner.'

'So they all saw it?'

'No, very few saw anything.'

'I hope you're right.'

With all the plotting and hounding going on, the last thing the Prime Minister needed was another health rumour mill, another chance for one of Anthony Eden's people to talk about passing on the baton, or to take you

to one side to whisper the word *ga-ga*. In Westminster rumours and insurrections sprang up overnight, like mushrooms.

‘But,’ Colville said, ‘I suspect those who did see something thought the Prime Minister may have drunk too much.’

‘Drunk too much?’

‘Might have been a bit the worse for wear.’

Drunk too much? *The worse for wear?* Moran’s hands ticked with annoyance. Why did Winston always risk going too far? How many times had he told him about the dangers of over-indulgence, of over-eating, of over-drinking, not to mention too many cigars, and above all how many times had he told him never to mix the pills (red or white) with the champagne?

As for his own habits, Moran never drank more than a single dry sherry before dinner. Just the one and then his hand went firmly over his glass. If Moran was a connoisseur of any drink it was good clear water, which was why Winston liked to mock what he called his doctor’s monkish streak.

‘But he hadn’t drunk too much?’

‘No, not a bit of it. He was on top form, made a brilliant little speech. Pure Winston, it really was. Winston neat and undiluted.’

Moran was not comfortable with all this Winston-this-Winston-that over-familiarity. The simple words ‘Prime Minister’ would do. A few old-fashioned manners from the young man wouldn’t go amiss. For all his family

background, Colville would do well to stick to the facts and remember that he was only the Prime Minister's secretary.

'So it was very sudden?' Moran asked.

'As far as one could see from the other side of the table.'

'What about the waiters?'

'I'm sorry?'

'You heard. I said what about the waiters.'

Colville shook his head.

'There won't be any murmurings. Don't you worry, I've seen to that.'

'And he walked up to his bedroom?'

'We got him into the lift. With a little help.'

Though it went against the grain, Moran did wonder if this might be the right moment to ask Colville the indiscreet and disquieting question, but before he could even fully consider the risks involved in such a course he found that he had asked it out loud:

'Did the Prime Minister know, before this happened to him, how bad Eden is? Had anyone briefed him on how things are in Boston?'

To this unexpected delivery Colville played, after the slightest of smiles, the straightest of bats:

'I am not aware how much the Prime Minister knew, or knows, about Mr Eden's condition.'

With his hackles raised, Moran picked up his bag and strode straight past him.