

His Finest Hour

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June 3, 1940 - 06:30

Rasping and gasping for breath, Hastings Ismay raced down the clammy, impassive corridors of the War Rooms, on the tail of an impatient and irate Winston Churchill. Hastings wanted to ask Churchill what the matter was, but he feared he knew the response and, also, preferred to avert a fountain of spittle where feasible. In spite of himself, Hastings frantically called after Churchill, like an avaricious vendor chasing a thief through the Berwick Street market. Eventually, Churchill gave in to Hastings' distressed shrieks and, when he did, Hastings regretted saying a word.

Churchill turned on his heel, the crimson-coated podge of his face wobbling like jelly as he did so, imperiously staring his inferior down. The man's elegant, crisp frock coat looked incongruous with the dismal underground tunnel the pair stood in. Churchill's frame was more than corpulent. It was domineering, demeaning and disturbing all at once; this was a man changed by the horrors of war. He wore a livid expression, his face the colour the automotive artisans describe as "Rosso Corsa", with hideous blotches of deathly white. The indecorous combination of colours came from a mixture of an excess of whiskey and tobacco and the Prime Minister's perpetual rage. Said rage was presently piqued by the protestable presence of a person perceived as an irritating insect.

"They're bloody useless, the lot of them!" bellowed Churchill, spittle fountains audibly accompanying his 'L' sounds. "First, the Belgians surrender on us like the spineless phlegms that they are and now, we have to send bloody rag-baggers and trawlermen to Dunkirk. Roosevelt's sat on his bloody arse doing nothing and the plebs are starving to death. The whole bloody war effort's crumbling!"

"What of the Dunkirk Spirit? That's what you say when you've got the *public's* ear?" enquired Hastings, bracing himself for the tirade that would surely come of taking such a risk.

Surprisingly, Churchill spoke quietly when he did. "To hell with the Dunkirk Spirit! I don't have the public's ear now, do I? I just have the ear of my simpleton military advisor, who doesn't

even have the wherewithal to differentiate between how one wins a war and how one tells one's followers one is winning the war." Although the monologue was clearly a taunt and, probably an intended provocation, there was a chilling tone of genuine exasperation and weariness.

Perhaps Churchill does consider me an inadequate dullard, Hastings pondered.

As the flustered Prime Minister turned on his heel and stalked away, Hastings privately chuckled and muttered spitefully, "Of course he bloody does. There isn't a man or a woman under the Sun, God bless them all – except the Axis Alliance – who Winston Churchill does not find inadequate."

June 3, 1940 – 09:40

Maria Alcock stared out of the right-hand front window of the Churchills' dwelling, No. 10 Downing Street, the corners of her mouth inclined imperceptibly downwards as her mind filled with dismay at the arrival of her master. The hundred or so press agents swarming him would only darken his mood. Maria called after her co-worker, Margot, who was leaving the room in a way which showed how accustomed *she* was to the demand, "Pour him a whiskey, now. Make it a double." Margot nodded knowingly before hastily leaving the room to run the crucial errand. Maria thought she heard the sound of the heavy front door creaking on its hinges downstairs. The familiarity of the sound was one she had learnt to grow accustomed to. To her horror, she caught sight of a newspaper shutterbug angling his camera up, towards her. She sidestepped out of the way and only hoped she had done so in time. If Churchill found out that a blurred picture of Maria was in *The Daily Mirror*, there would be hell to pay.

"Bloody pestering me again, are you?" Churchill moaned at whoever it was that had been unfortunate enough to greet him, "I saw you a few hours ago. You're an ugly slag and I wish I'd never married you."

Maria grimaced. *Clementine*. Even though her own lot was hard enough with the belligerent tyrant that was Winston Churchill, Maria genuinely pitied poor old Clementine, his wife. The

woman, when one got to know her, was a real gem among pebbles and, as a benevolent human being like herself, there was only so much the woman could bear.

“I’m not pestering you, love,” replied Clementine, meekly, “it’s just that the telephone’s been ringing like nobody’s business.”

“I don’t care if it rings and rings like a leper's bell,” snapped Churchill, his booming voice getting louder as he and his wife progressed up the staircase. “The servants had better have fixed me a drink.”

“Oh, Margot,” muttered Maria beneath her breath, “may God have mercy on your soul,” she added, reciting the old execution day blessing.

“Mary, Margaret!” shouted Churchill, now standing on the landing at the top of the stairs, “If you haven’t made me a whiskey, I’ll strap you both to the next bomb we send those German swine.”

Maria contemplated for a moment who Mary and Margaret were, but then she recalled: they were Churchill’s crude corruptions of Maria and Margot’s names. As the realisation dawned on her, she heard the reassuring sound of a glass being set down on a table and wiped the perspiration from her brow. The brute had been appeased.

June 3, 1940 – 12:00

Churchill wore the sullen, dejected face of a toddler acceding to the announcement from its mother that it was time to go to bed. In many ways, Clementine mused, that was probably also how the man felt. After a good couple of hours claiming that he was too busy a man and in too high demand to answer the phone, he gave in to Clementine’s gingerly applied pressure and answered; cursing the racket made by the house-staff preparing his lunch.

Clementine tried her best to give a reassuring smile but it probably came across as weak and insincere, at least by the scowl her husband gave her in return. She watched hesitantly as he lifted the receiver and dialled the number to return the call. *1169*.

Almost immediately, she heard the distant but imploring voice of Mr Ismay who picked up and saw the rising ire of Churchill as he listened. Clementine guessed that he had wanted Hastings missing the call to use as leverage so he wouldn't have to deal with whatever was at hand.

“What in the bloody blazes?” Churchill exclaimed, “This is more embarrassing than the French surrender but, unlike the feeble frogs, I'll be damned if this doesn't have a good outcome.”

Clementine Churchill sensed the reluctance in what her husband said next.

“Hmph,” he mumbled gruffly, “I'll be there as soon as I've had lunch.”

In true Winston fashion, he slammed the receiver into its socket without waiting for a response from Ismay.

June 3, 1940 – 17:00

This time, as Winston Churchill approached No. 10 Downing Street, the press agents and photographers had disbanded their swarm. It was almost as though they sensed the paramount importance of the news the Prime Minister bore. Maria noticed that Churchill was about twenty stacks of paper heavier than when he had left the house, a few hours earlier, something which was probably not helping his mood.

“I've already made him a drink,” Margot said absently, as she joined Maria at the window. They heard the familiar sound of the front door opening and closing as Winston Churchill entered the hallway on the ground floor. Like a fly being swatted, Margot rushed away from the window and almost ran down the winding staircase, with all its portraits of Prime Ministers along the side, sending Robert Gascoyne-Cecil for an unwanted ride as she brushed past him. Maria peered over the banister and saw Margot give Churchill his much-needed whiskey.

For once genuinely interested in what her master had to say, Maria strained her ears to get a better listen to snippets of the Churchills' conversation.

“...successful. So, I must...rally the public. Bloody hell if I'm not good at...in the country will be...big one for sure.”

Maria was hardly a military genius or a political one, but she knew that something big was happening the next day... A speech, perhaps.

June 4, 1940 – 11:00

“Skivvy,” barked Churchill, “Light me a cigar! Or is that too much to ask of a lazy buck like you?” he added derisively.

Elijah Densmore, the Churchills’ veteran butler, a man hardened to racial slurs and scornful remarks, lit the Prime Minister the largest cigar he could muster, a process that was muscle memory by that point. Churchill reluctantly grumbled his gratefulness as he took a puff of the cigar before announcing that he was ready to depart for Parliament. As Elijah managed to subtly extract some details about the trip and realised that he would be there until quite late on, he made a mental note to have an absolute banquet ready for the Prime Minister’s return. Whether the Prime Minister would eat it or stay in his War Rooms until silly o’clock, the butler knew not. However, with Churchill, trying to please never went amiss, mostly...

June 4, 1940 – 16:00

“The Prime Minister.”

At the sound of the speaker, Edward FitzRoy’s voice, Churchill rose to his feet, the simple effort of the movement making him breathless. The sound of his feet impacting with the wooden floor beneath him echoed ominously throughout the House. He cleared his throat, ready to make the speech he had prepared since his arrival back home from the War Rooms at teatime the previous day.

“I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary, alone.”

Clementine Churchill, who was spectating and listening to the speech from outside the House of Commons, privately chuckled at the irony of Churchill's supposed campaign against tyranny.

“At any rate, that is what we are going to try to do. That is the resolve of His Majesty's Government – every man of them. That is the will of Parliament and the nation.

“The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength.

“Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail.

“We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills.

“We shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old one.”

As he seated himself, Churchill whispered to an adjacent colleague, “And we'll fight them with the butt ends of broken beer bottles because that's bloody well all we've got.”