Con Coughlin

CHURCHILL'S FIRST WAR

Young Winston and the Fight Against the Taliban

MACMILLAN

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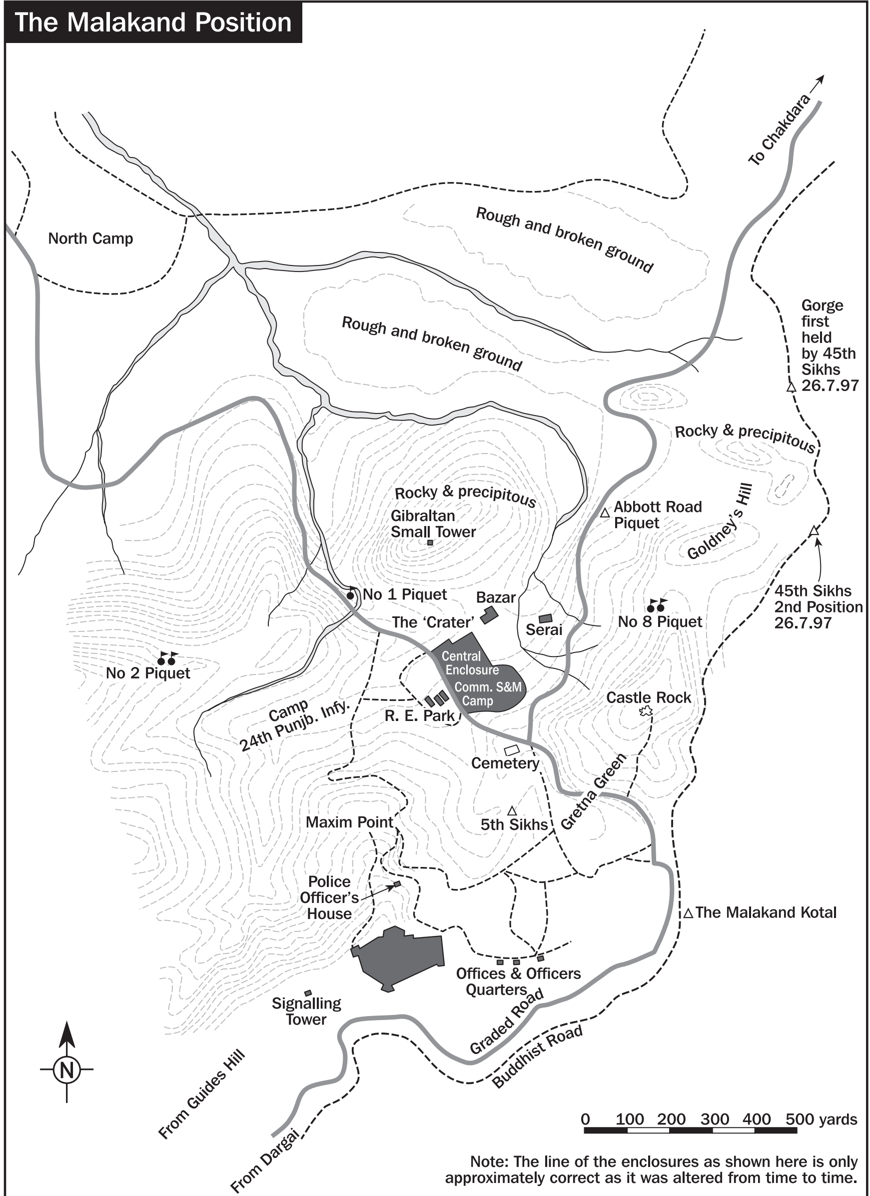
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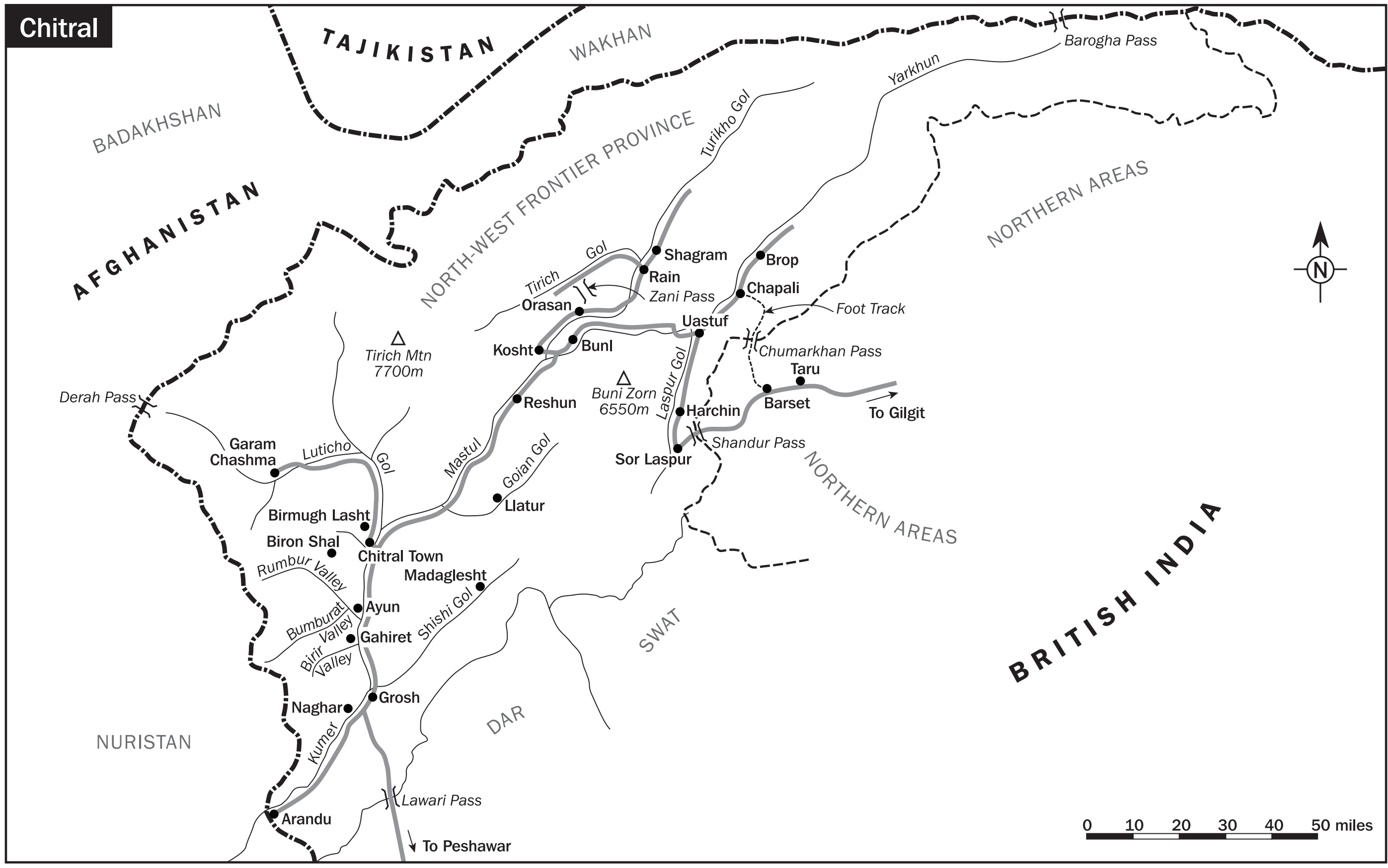
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Prologue

'Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result.'
Winston S. Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*

On the outskirts of the old British fort at Malakand, there is a cemetery where the bodies of young officers who died fighting for Queen and Country in a hostile outpost of the British Empire were laid to rest. Throughout the course of the nineteenth century, thousands of British soldiers lost their lives fighting the warlike tribesmen who inhabited the forbidding mountain ranges that lay between Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier of the Indian Empire. And it was here, in 1897, that Winston Churchill, as a twenty-two-year-old subaltern in the British cavalry, fought in the first of the many wars he would experience throughout the course of his long and eventful life.

For nearly six weeks Churchill risked life and limb fighting against the frontier's rebellious Pashtun tribesmen, and on several occasions came close to being killed, or at the very least suffering serious injury. He was involved in at least three 'sharp skirmishes', and at times the fighting was so intense that the tribesmen were able to throw rocks at him when they ran out of bullets. In all, as Churchill later boasted to his mother, he came under fire '10 complete times', and received a mention in dispatches for his bravery. Despite putting himself at risk on several occasions, Churchill survived the ordeal, but many of the other young British officers who fought at his side were not so lucky, and their remains today lie in the old British cemetery beside the fort where Churchill was based.

Among the officers buried at Malakand is Second Lieutenant William Browne-Clayton of the Royal West Kent Regiment, who was killed on 30 September 1897. During his stay at Malakand Churchill became close friends with the Eton-educated Browne-Clayton, who was two years older than him and came from a prosperous family of Irish landowners. The two young officers were involved in an operation to clear hostile tribesmen from a village close to the Afghan border when Browne-Clayton was shot as he attempted to organize the withdrawal of his men, who were in danger of being overrun by the enemy. He died instantly when the bullet struck his heart, and his death had a profound effect on Churchill. *The Times* reported the skirmish in which Browne-Clayton died by printing a telegram sent by Lord Elgin, the Viceroy of India, to London, which reported matter-of-factly: 'Enemy made considerable resistance and troops, being hotly engaged at close quarters, suffered some loss.'[1]

As a young man, Churchill did not believe he was prone to overt displays of emotion, but Browne-Clayton's death hit him hard. In Churchill's later account of the campaign, he simply states the facts: 'Lieutenant Browne-Clayton remained till the last, to watch the withdrawal, and in so doing was shot dead, the bullet severing the blood-vessels near his heart.'[2] But in a letter home, written a few months after the fighting finished, he tells how he broke down in tears when he saw Browne-Clayton's body being removed from the battlefield on the back of a mule. 'I very rarely detect genuine emotion in myself,' he wrote. 'I must rank as a rare instance the fact that I cried when I met the Royal West Kents on the 30th Sept. and saw the men really unsteady under fire and tired of the game, and that poor young officer Browne-Clayton, literally cut to pieces on a stretcher – through his men not having stood by him.'[3] Had it not been for Churchill's own good fortune, he could easily have suffered a similar fate. At times during the fighting he said the tribesmen's

bullets missed him by only a foot. Had they hit their target Churchill, like his friend Browne-Clayton, would lie today in some remote and forgotten grave, barely remembered. The world would have been denied one of its greatest wartime leaders, and the history of the twentieth century may well have taken a different course.

The Malakand campaign was the war that made Churchill's name. Before volunteering to join the punitive expedition of the Malakand Field Force on the North-West Frontier of India, Churchill was known as the impoverished son of a maverick British politician, though he traced his descent from the Duke of Marlborough, one of Britain's greatest warriors. An indifferent pupil at school who only narrowly managed – at the third attempt – to pass the entrance examination to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, young Winston's prospects hardly looked promising. Nor were they improved when his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, died of syphilis shortly after Winston celebrated his twentieth birthday. Despite these disadvantages, Winston was determined from an early age to make a name for himself and pursue a career in politics. As a schoolboy, Winston had visited the Distinguished Strangers' Gallery at Westminster to hear Prime Minister William Gladstone, the 'Grand Old Man' of British politics, wind up the debate on the Home Rule Bill. The untimely death of Lord Randolph, which had cut short a political career that had once shown great promise, only strengthened his determination to succeed. No sooner had Churchill secured his commission to serve in the 4th (Queen's Own) Hussars, one of England's elite cavalry regiments, than he was thinking about how to secure the parliamentary seat that would launch his career in politics. Churchill believed that a distinguished military career was, for someone of his background and class, the perfect preparation for entering politics. Winning medals and decorations fighting for his country would enable him to 'beat my sword into an iron Despatch Box'. For Churchill, this was the perfect

'foundation for political life', after which he intended to 'devote my life to the preservation of this great Empire and to trying to maintain the progress of the English people'.[4]

Churchill's participation in the Malakand campaign laid the foundations for his future career in a number of ways. First and foremost, his decision to volunteer for duty on the Afghan border provided him with valuable combat experience. On various occasions he demonstrated courage under fire, winning the admiration of his commanding officers as well as an all-important mention in dispatches. General Sir Bindon Blood, the campaign commander, even suggested he might stand a chance of winning the much-coveted Victoria Cross. Churchill's successful campaign in Malakand resulted in him taking part in several more, including the Boer War, where his dramatic escape from captivity made him a household name, helping him to win his first seat as an MP for Oldham in 1900.

Apart from the military aspects, Churchill's brief interlude at Malakand was notable for other reasons. He wrote a series of articles on the conflict for the *Daily Telegraph*, which were well received in London, prompting the Prince of Wales to commend him for his 'great facility in writing'. The newspaper articles, moreover, resulted in Churchill receiving a commission to publish his first book, which appeared in March 1898 under the title *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War*. The critics reviewed the book favourably, with one describing it as an 'extremely interesting and well-written account'. Within weeks of publication, Churchill had received invitations to write biographies of his father and his great martial ancestor, the Duke of Marlborough, both of which he accomplished later in life. If all else failed, the future Nobel Prize-winning author believed he could 'supplement my income by writing'.[5] His experiences fighting on the North-West Frontier would feature prominently in his first autobiographical work, *My Early Life*, which was published more than thirty years later.

It was at Malakand that Churchill also discovered a lifelong fondness for whisky.

*

The Malakand campaign was a pivotal moment in Churchill's rise to greatness, which makes it all the more surprising that this period in his life tends to be overlooked. Churchill's exploits occupy a few pages of the major biographies, while Carl Foreman and Richard Attenborough's 1972 classic film, *Young Winston*, devotes only the opening frames to the young subaltern's hair-raising adventures fighting the 'fierce hill men' of the Afghan border, while the rest of the narrative concentrates on his more celebrated exploits in the Sudan and the Boer War. The film opens with a shot of Churchill astride a grey horse on a hilltop on the North-West Frontier.

'Who's that bloody fool on the grey?' asks the colonel.

'Someone who wants to be noticed, I imagine,' an officer replies.

'He'll be noticed – he'll get his bloody head blown off.'[6]

The neglect of this formative period in Churchill's life is partly because, compared with his later adventures in South Africa, Churchill was fighting for only a few weeks, and his role in the campaign was peripheral. Another consideration must be that the tale of his capture and subsequent escape from a prison camp in Pretoria is more compelling, especially in view of the effect it had on his political fortunes when Churchill, like Byron after publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, awoke one morning to find himself famous. But Andrew Roberts, an eminent author on Churchill, believes the few weeks he spent on the North-West Frontier was the moment when his rise to greatness truly began. In Roberts's opinion, 'Churchill's participation in the Malakand Field Force is a neglected but fascinating period of his life, which formed his approach to war and laid the foundations of his path to political glory.'[7]

The revival of interest in Churchill's involvement with the Malakand Field Force began in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks of 2001, when a new generation of foreign soldiers found themselves returning to do battle in the daunting terrain of the Hindu Kush. The arrival of an American-led military coalition in Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001 followed the refusal of the Taliban government in Kabul to hand over Osama bin Laden, the head of the al-Qaeda network which was behind the September 11 attacks. The Taliban, led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, a radical cleric from the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, is an Islamic religious movement that originated among the Pashtun tribes that inhabit the mountainous border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan and which has controlled the North-West Frontier Province since the creation of Pakistan in 1947. Today the tribal areas where Churchill fought enjoy semi-autonomous status from the Pakistan government and are known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA. Mullah Omar's refusal to hand over bin Laden, who had been offered sanctuary in the Taliban's stronghold in southern Afghanistan, led to the coalition forces overthrowing the Taliban government and forcing Mullah Omar and his al-Qaeda allies to flee across the border to the tribal areas of Pakistan, where many of them sought refuge among the fiercely independent Pashtun tribes. Before long the Americans and their allies found themselves involved in a brutal conflict against the very same tribes that Winston Churchill had fought in the 1890s.

For the British army, which deployed to southern Afghanistan in the summer of 2006, the feeling of déjà vu was even more intense, as soldiers arrived to fight in the same area where, more than a century before, their forebears had suffered one of their bloodiest defeats at the Battle of Maiwand in July 1880. Maiwand is situated fifty miles from Kandahar, Afghanistan's second city, and for many years the Taliban's headquarters. When the first British troops arrived as part of the NATO

mission, they were pitched into some of the fiercest fighting experienced since the Second World War as the descendants of the tribesmen who had fought against Lord Roberts of Kandahar's troops in the nineteenth century attempted to inflict a similarly humiliating defeat. In the summer of 2009 General Sir David Richards, the newly appointed head of the British army, warned that the conflict in Afghanistan could last up to forty years.[8]

Like the British in the nineteenth century, America has acquired the unwelcome role of the world's policeman, and in that capacity it has been obliged to take the lead in the NATO operation to defeat the Taliban, eradicate al-Qaeda and bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, a country that has been involved in some form of conflict since the Soviet invasion of 1979. The technology available to American forces, particularly the introduction of unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, is radically different from the more basic soldiering techniques employed by the Malakand Field Force, but the terrain and the targets remain much the same. If the Central Intelligence Agency, which directs many of the drone operations, were to draw up a map of the hundreds of drone strikes that have been launched against insurgent groups in the tribal areas, it would find that they were targeting virtually the same villages and valleys in the FATA area where Churchill and his colleagues fought more than one hundred years earlier. One of the most controversial American cross-border raids into Pakistan on 26 November 2011, when US aircraft killed twenty-four Pakistani soldiers during an attack on the border post of Salala, took place in exactly the same valley where William Browne-Clayton died in 1897.

Before 2001, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* was out of print and largely forgotten, except by dedicated Churchill bibliophiles who were prepared to pay considerable sums for rare copies of Winston's first literary endeavour. But with the arrival of more than 100,000 foreign soldiers in Afghanistan, new

editions were published as the finest military minds struggled to fathom the dynamics of the highly complex tribal revolt that confronted them. General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan until the summer of 2010, was said to listen to Churchill's account on his iPod during his daily eight-mile jog around the military base in Kabul. And General David Petraeus, who devised America's post-September 11 strategy for fighting counter-insurgency campaigns, said he drew on Churchill's account when writing the US army's new field manual which was published in December 2006.[9] A lifelong fan of Churchill, Petraeus, who became the CIA's director when he finished commanding NATO troops in Afghanistan in 2011, often took time out during trips to Britain to visit Churchill museums. He was keen, therefore, to learn from Churchill's experience when he devised his strategy for dealing with the Taliban. 'We captured the lessons of the British in the late nineteenth century in the field manual,' he explained. 'I am a great admirer of Winston Churchill, although what the British did in his book is not something you could do today.'[10]

Petraeus was referring to the British policy of burning villages to punish the tribes for rebelling against imperial rule, although there will be many who argue that the US drone strikes have inflicted just as much misery and hardship on the Pashtun communities. The different dynamics between the modern conflict and Churchill's experience were evident when I travelled to Pakistan in the autumn of 2012 to visit the area where operations of the Malakand Field Force took place. My first task was to persuade Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) agency, which helped to create the Taliban movement and is said by many still to control it, to allow me to visit the area, and once I arrived I had to take care that its rival intelligence service, the CIA, was not planning to carry out one of its drone strikes.

At Malakand Fort I received a formal welcome from a young Pakistani army captain of 1st Battalion, the Azad Kashmir Regiment (*azad* means 'free' in Urdu), who agreed to show me

to the room where Churchill stayed during his service with the Malakand Field Force, and where he wrote some of his articles for the *Daily Telegraph*. As he showed me round the fort, which was under construction at the time of the 1897 revolt, I was intrigued to find a large tracking device located in the centre of the main compound. The officer explained that it was an early warning system used to detect the movement of low-flying aircraft coming across the border from Afghanistan. The previous year a team of US Navy SEALs had flown from Afghanistan to attack bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, a Pakistani military training academy about a hundred miles to the east of Malakand. Rather than fighting the Taliban, it seemed the priority of the Pakistani force at Malakand was to prevent the Americans carrying out any further 'kill or capture' missions on their territory.

In many respects, though, the challenges faced by the latest generation of soldiers fighting in this inhospitable mountain region of the Afghan border are strikingly similar to those encountered by the British at the end of the nineteenth century. They are fighting the same Pashtun tribesmen who are determined to maintain their independence from foreign interference, and who have been inspired by a particularly uncompromising brand of Islamist ideology to resist the occupiers. The cost of maintaining a campaign that has lasted longer than anyone imagined has become prohibitive, while Kabul is controlled by an Afghan ruler who is neither trusted nor respected. And the longer the conflict continues, the harder it becomes for Western politicians to decide whether they should stay the course, or leave and abandon the Afghans to their fate. The conclusions Churchill reached about the Malakand campaign were equally bleak. 'Financially it is ruinous. Morally it is wicked. Militarily it is an open question, and politically it is a blunder,' he wrote.[11] Churchill's views on waging war against the 'wild rifle-armed clansmen' on the Afghan border are as true today as they were when the young cavalryman set off to fight in his first war.

Chapter One

PASSING OUT

'No hour of life is lost that is spent in the saddle.'
Winston S. Churchill, *My Early Life*

When the young Winston Churchill arrived at the North-West Frontier of the Indian Empire in the early autumn of 1897 he very quickly formed a low opinion of the Taliban. In Churchill's day, the great-great-grandfathers of those who created the modern Taliban movement were known as the Talib-ul-ilms, a motley collection of indigent holy men who lived off the goodwill and hospitality of the local Afghan tribes and preached insurrection against the British Empire. To Churchill's mind, these Talibs were, together with other local priestly figures such as the mullahs and fakirs, primarily responsible for the wretched condition of the local Afghan tribesfolk and their violent indisposition to foreign rule. In Churchill's view they were 'as degraded a race as any on the fringe of humanity: fierce as a tiger, but less cleanly; as dangerous, not so graceful'.[1] He blamed the Talibs for the Afghans' lamentable absence of civilized development, keeping them in the 'grip of miserable superstition'. Churchill was particularly repelled by the Talibs' loose moral conduct. They lived free at the expense of the people and, 'more than this, they enjoy a sort of "droit de seigneur", and no man's wife or daughter is safe from them. Of some of their manners and morals it is impossible to write.'[2]

Churchill saw the conflict in even more apocalyptic terms when he published his first newspaper article on his experiences as a young British soldier locked in mortal combat with these

fearsome Afghan tribesmen. 'Civilisation is face to face with militant Mohammedism,' he wrote. He entertained no doubts as to the conflict's ultimate outcome for, given the 'moral and material forces arrayed against each other, there need be no fear of the ultimate issue'.[3] Even so, he lamented the warlike nature of the tribes who inhabited the mountainous no-man's land between Afghanistan to the north and British India to the south. Many tribes, the majority of them Pashtuns, lived in the wild but wealthy valleys that led from Afghanistan to India, but they were all of similar character and condition. Except when they were sowing or harvesting their crops, Churchill observed that a continual state of feud and strife prevailed throughout the land. 'Tribe wars with tribe. The people of one valley fight with those of the next. To the quarrels of communities are added the combats of individuals. Khan assails khan, each supported by his retainers. Every tribesman has a blood feud against his neighbour. Every man's hand is against the other, and all are against the stranger.'[4] More than a hundred years later, when a new generation of Western soldiers deployed to Central Asia, they found that little had changed in the way the tribes of the Afghan frontier conducted themselves.

In criticizing some of the Talibs' more depraved practices, Churchill conveniently overlooked the conduct of his own social milieu back in London, which could hardly be described as a cradle of virtuous rectitude. The loose moral values observed in certain upper-class circles of late-Victorian England were most famously embodied by the louche conduct of the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII. A close family friend of the Churchills, 'Bertie' entertained a string of mistresses; one of his conquests was said to be Winston's mother Jennie, the wife of the Tory peer Lord Randolph Churchill and a notable society beauty. The American-born Jennie is credited with having had more than two hundred lovers of her own and was susceptible to the charms of young Guards officers who were barely older than Winston.

But Churchill was not much interested in comparing the social and religious codes of Victorian Britain with those practised among the mountain fastnesses of Afghanistan. Even at this early stage in his life his sole concern was to make his name, and in this regard his mother's high social connections worked to his advantage. One of her many admirers was General Sir Bindon Blood, who had been appointed to lead a punitive expedition against the Pashtuns, the dominant tribe on the Afghan border, after they had launched an unprovoked attack on the strategically important fort of Malakand on the North-West Frontier. One of the most accomplished soldiers of his day, Blood had fought in every British campaign since the Zulu wars of the 1870s. In 1895 he had been a senior commander of the British military incursion into Pashtun territory to liberate the British garrison at Chitral, the northernmost outpost of the Indian Empire, making him the ideal choice to lead the new expedition.

Blood had met and befriended Lady Churchill at country-house parties hosted by Winston's favourite aunt, Duchess Lily, at her home in Deepdene, Surrey. Winston met him at Deepdene, too, and had managed to make an impression on the old warrior, extracting a promise from him that if ever Blood commanded another expedition on the Indian frontier, he would allow Churchill to accompany him.[5] The moment his appointment to lead the campaign against the Afghans was confirmed, Jennie was able to intercede on her son's behalf and persuade Blood to allow the eager young officer to join what he called his 'pheasant shoot'.

A number of factors contributed to Churchill's desperation to join the thick of the action on the Afghan border, the most pressing of which was his unrelenting determination to further his personal reputation. As he wrote to his mother shortly after he had arrived at Blood's headquarters, 'I have faith in my star – that I am intended to do something in this world. If I am mistaken – what does it matter? My life has been a pleasant one

and though I should regret to leave it, it would be a regret that perhaps I should never know.'[6] The prevailing sense of fatalism expressed in this letter is perhaps surprising in a young man embarking on adult life, but then Churchill was no ordinary young man.

*

By a stroke of good fortune, Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill was born on 30 November 1874 at Blenheim Palace, which was given by a grateful nation to John Churchill, the 1st Duke of Marlborough as a reward for the stunning string of victories he won against the French during the War of the Spanish Succession in the early eighteenth century. Lord and Lady Randolph had planned for their baby to be born in London, but a heavy fall sustained by Jennie while accompanying a shooting party on the Blenheim estate caused her to go into labour early, thereby ensuring that the infant was delivered in a modest ground-floor room with a view of Blenheim's beautifully landscaped grounds. The baby was named Winston after the father of the 1st Duke and immediately became heir presumptive to the Marlborough dukedom, and would remain so until the birth of his cousin John. The significance of being born in a palace was never lost on young Winston, as it anchored him firmly to one of the greatest aristocratic families of the age. In later life he would remark, 'At Blenheim I took two very important decisions; to be born and to marry, and I am content with the decision I took on both occasions.' Throughout his life Churchill drew inspiration from his aristocratic lineage and descent from the warrior duke, which laid the foundations for his own success.

Indeed, the realization that he was unlikely to accede to the dukedom was one of the factors that spurred him on, not only to make his reputation, but to make his fortune too. For while Churchill could lay claim to membership of one of Britain's most famous families, by the time he volunteered to fight in India, his immediate family's position was dire. Lord Randolph

had died in January 1895 at the age of forty-six and had, according to Lord Rosebery, the future British prime minister, spent the last six years of his life 'dying by inches in public'. His father's last months were particularly traumatic for Winston, who had to watch as Lord Randolph succumbed to tertiary syphilis, his appearance ruined and his speech incoherent.[7]

It was a miserable end for a man who, at one point in his short career, was hailed as a saviour of the Conservative Party and a serious contender to become a Tory prime minister. He was certainly unrecognizable from the dashing and brilliant young man who had won the heart of the young Jennie Jerome at a yachting regatta on the Isle of Wight in August 1873. Jennie was the latest in a long line of wealthy young American women – the dollar princesses, as they were known – to have married into the Churchill family. Winston's uncle, the 8th Duke of Marlborough, had married a member of the Hammersley family who had made millions out of New York real estate, and his cousin 'Sunny', who became the 9th Duke in 1892, married the railroad heiress Consuelo Vanderbilt in New York's St Thomas Church in 1895.

The Jerome family had originally settled in upstate New York after sailing to America from the Isle of Wight in 1710 in search of religious freedom. Jennie's father, Leonard, was a Wall Street buccaneer whose own family could lay claim to a modest military pedigree. At least two of his forebears had fought against the British in the American War of Independence while another had marched and fought with George Washington's army at Valley Forge. Leonard's experience of conflict, on the other hand, was as a speculator who made a vast fortune trading stocks during the American Civil War, which enabled him to build a six-storey mansion at the corner of Madison Avenue and 26th Street. The building was so vast it contained a theatre, which Leonard used to stage his own entertainments. His newly acquired wealth enabled him to buy a stake in the *New York Times*, which was then a strongly Republican newspaper, where

he became a consulting editor. When, in 1863, violent draft riots erupted in New York, the paper's editorial board thought it prudent to fortify itself with two Gatling guns, which were mounted in the business office under Leonard's command to protect the building from being burnt and looted by the mob.[8] In the event, they were never used.

Although wealthy, Leonard Jerome was not in the same league as the Vanderbilts, and had suffered serious reverses on the stock market. He therefore settled on his daughter a relatively modest dowry of £50,000 (around £3 million in today's values). Even so, such a sum would have been sufficient for most young couples embarking on married life – Lord Randolph was twenty-five, and his wife just twenty. But the Churchills' social and political aspirations were such that they were forever living beyond their means. Lord Randolph had just become the Conservative MP for Woodstock, the local parliamentary constituency for Blenheim. Jennie, meanwhile, threw herself wholeheartedly into high-society life in London. As Lord Randolph's biographer R. F. Foster has remarked, 'If he and his wife were remarkable for anything in the first three years of his parliamentary career, it was for a life-style of conspicuous and frivolous consumption.'[9] This set the pattern for most of their marriage, which meant that Lord Randolph, who was also an inveterate gambler, was invariably in debt, a state of affairs that continued even when he was, for a brief period in the 1880s, appointed Secretary of State for India and then Chancellor of the Exchequer, both positions that provided reasonable salaries.

At this stage in Winston's childhood, when Lord Randolph's fortunes were very much in the ascendant and he was a prominent figure in the Fourth Party, a group of well-connected Tory modernizers, Jennie hosted one of the most sought-after *salons* in London, where an eclectic mix of politicians, artists and journalists would collect to discuss the pressing issues of the day. Early in their marriage she hosted a dinner party where

the guests included both the Conservative leader Benjamin Disraeli and the Prince of Wales, and she maintained the same calibre of social connections throughout her life. One of her adoring male admirers, Lord D'Abernon, who in his youth was known as the 'Piccadilly stallion' because of his many extra-marital affairs, recounted meeting Jennie early in her marriage: 'A diamond star in her hair, her favourite ornament – its lustre dimmed by the flashing glory of her eyes. More of the panther than of the woman in her look, but with a cultivated intelligence unknown to the jungle.'[10] Jennie was entrancing to her young son too, who later recalled that she was 'a fairy princess: a radiant being possessed of limitless power and riches'.[11] But, as is the case with fairy princesses, he did not see very much of her.

For much of Churchill's upbringing his parents were far too concerned with their political and social activities to devote much energy to caring for their son and heir. Lord Randolph, until his health deteriorated, spent up to nine months of the year travelling for business and pleasure. Jennie, meanwhile, was juggling the attentions of her various suitors. Mary Soames, Churchill's youngest daughter, recalls an elderly relative who had known Jennie when Winston was a boy telling her, when asked whether Lord and Lady Randolph were really such bad parents, 'I think that even by the standards of their generation . . . they were pretty awful.'[12] The woeful neglect of Churchill's upbringing by his parents had a potentially disastrous impact on his childhood, particularly when it came to his schooling. But it also had a profound influence on his development in later life, not least because, from an early age, Winston was accustomed to his family moving in the highest social circles, in which his parents mixed easily with royalty, politicians and newspaper barons, contacts that would prove invaluable when the time came for Churchill to make his own way in the world. Less helpful was his exposure to his parents' extravagant and

spendthrift ways for, like them, Churchill would spend most of his life desperately seeking ways to escape the burden of his many debts.

In his parents' absence, Churchill and his brother Jack, who was six years younger than Winston, became devoted to their nanny, Mrs Everest, a middle-aged widow from Kent who had been hired soon after Winston's birth. 'Woomy', as the boys called her, became Churchill's emotional bedrock, especially after, at the age of seven, he was sent to board at a preparatory school in Ascot where the headmaster took a sadistic delight in administering regular floggings to his charges. It was mainly thanks to Mrs Everest, who noticed the tell-tale scars when Winston returned for the school holidays, that he was removed and sent to a more agreeable establishment in Brighton. By the time he reached his ninth birthday Winston was a sickly child, and the family physician believed the sea air would lead to a radical improvement in his health. The change of school resulted in a modest advance in his academic performance, particularly in Classics and French, although his boisterous behaviour meant that he invariably found himself bottom of the class for Conduct. His parents visited rarely, and it was only when, aged eleven, Winston contracted pneumonia and was close to death for two days that Lord Randolph could be persuaded to visit his son, even though he was often in Brighton to address political rallies. This was the period when Lord Randolph's political career was at its peak and, soon after Winston had made a full recovery, he was appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer in Lord Salisbury's second administration. Aged only thirty-seven, Lord Randolph had every reason to believe that he might ultimately become prime minister, although even at this juncture he had acquired many detractors. When a retired naval officer suggested Lord Randolph's name as a future Tory leader to Gladstone, he is said to have retorted: '*Never.* God forbid that any great English party should be led by a Churchill! There never was a Churchill

from John of Marlborough down that had either morals or principles.'[13] Queen Victoria expressed doubts of her own about Lord Randolph's suitability for high office. She wrote in her journal on 25 July 1886 that Lord Salisbury had informed her that 'Randolph Churchill must be Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader, which I did not like. He is so mad and odd and has also bad health.'[14]

Lord Randolph's health was certainly an issue, resulting in frequent absences from front-bench politics and increasingly erratic conduct when he was in attendance. His critics accused him of contradicting himself, and of 'personal flightiness' in his dealings with fellow politicians. His unconventional behaviour led to his ignominious departure from the Treasury just six months after his appointment as Chancellor. In an ill-considered attempt to outmanoeuvre Lord Salisbury over a budget proposal, Lord Randolph tendered his resignation in the hope of forcing the prime minister to accept his plan to cut defence spending. Rather than be bullied, Salisbury confounded Lord Randolph by accepting his resignation, thereby bringing his political career to an abrupt end. As the historian A. J. P. Taylor once remarked, Lord Randolph 'might have been a great leader. In retrospect he appears a great nuisance.'

The implosion of Lord Randolph's career had a profound bearing on Churchill's own prospects. It had the immediate effect of further weakening the family's financial standing, as well as causing the Churchills to suffer social ostracism. Not only had Lord Randolph made himself look foolish by his resignation ploy, he had also managed to offend the monarch. He had written his resignation letter while staying as a guest of Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle on the assumption that it would never be accepted. The Queen was dismayed that she only learned about the resignation of one of her senior ministers through the editorial pages of *The Times*. And her irritation was intensified further when she discovered the letter had been written on royal notepaper, an unforgivable breach of royal etiquette. Jennie was

so upset by her husband's conduct that she gave serious consideration to seeking a divorce. To add to his woes, Lord Randolph had managed to offend his long-standing friend George Buckle, the editor of *The Times*, who refused to take his side in his dispute with Lord Salisbury. The strained relationship between the Churchill family and Buckle would later hinder Winston's attempts to break into British journalism, when *The Times* declined his offer to file war dispatches to the newspaper, which led him to offer his services to the *Daily Telegraph.*

As a twelve-year-old schoolboy in Brighton, Winston was not aware of the enormity of his father's folly. But he soon felt the full force of the public's contempt for Lord Randolph when he was taken to a pantomime in Brighton in early 1887, where the crowd started to hiss when an actor portrayed his father in a sketch. Winston burst into tears, and then turned furiously on a man who was hissing behind him and cried, 'Stop that now, you snub-nosed radical.'[15] Despite the fact that his father still neglected to visit him, Winston remained fiercely loyal. The need for parental approval is a common enough trait in most children; all the more so in those who have absentee parents. For the rest of his life Winston was suffused with the desire to avenge the premature end to his father's career, even if Lord Randolph was undeserving of such filial loyalty. Churchill's ambition to pursue a career in politics and achieve high office, which was evident in him from a young age, was inspired to an extent by his belief that his father had been unfairly treated, a theme he later explored in his biography of Lord Randolph. Twenty years later, when he published an account of his father's resignation, Churchill said Lord Randolph's mistake in submitting his resignation letter had been to overlook 'the anger and jealousy that his sudden rise to power had excited'.[16]

Although not an impressive pupil, Churchill nevertheless applied himself sufficiently to pass the entrance examination to Harrow, where he immediately joined the school cadet force. As a child Churchill had taken a keen interest in the military

and acquired an impressive collection of toy soldiers. It seemed as though he was obsessed with emulating the achievements of his great ancestors, while clinging to the old-fashioned view that proving personal courage on the field of battle was a prerequisite for the pursuit of a career in politics. At Harrow he was soon taking part in mock battles against local schools. He was taught to shoot the Martini-Henry rifle, the same weapon being used by the British army to fight the Pashtun tribesmen on the Afghan border. During normal school hours he showed promise in subjects he liked, such as English History and English Language. Although he languished in the school's lowest form, he nevertheless impressed the school's headmaster, Dr J. E. C. Welldon, by faultlessly reciting 1,200 lines from Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*, for which he won a prize open to the whole school. But his personal conduct left much to be desired, particularly his lateness and the frequency with which he lost his books and papers. He was accused of 'forgetfulness, carelessness, unpunctuality and irregularity in every way' by one of his exasperated masters, who wrote to his mother, 'He is so regular in his irregularity that I really don't know what to do.'[17]

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At an early stage in Winston's school career at Harrow, Lord Randolph decided that his son should go into the army, and arranged for him to be placed in Harrow's Army Class, which provided special tutoring for pupils who opted for a military career. Churchill recollected that Lord Randolph took the decision after inspecting his son's collection of 1,500 toy soldiers, which were all lined up in the correct formation of attack. 'He spent twenty minutes studying the scene – which was really impressive – with a keen and captivating smile. At the end he asked me if I would like to go into the army. I thought it would be splendid to command an army, so I said "Yes" at once: and immediately I was taken at my word.' Years later Churchill discovered that his father had made his decision because he

decided his son was not clever enough to study law. 'The toy soldiers turned the current of my life,' Churchill wrote. 'Henceforward all my education was directed to passing into Sandhurst, and afterwards to the technical details of the profession of arms. Anything else I had to pick up for myself.'[18]

The decision to place Winston in the Army Class effectively removed him from the mainstream of the school, as he now found himself in a segregated mixed-age group containing many of the school's duller boys. Winston had demonstrated that he had formidable powers of memory, and an aptitude for the use of the English language. But he was hopeless at mastering the complexities of Greek, Latin and Mathematics, which were the mainstays of a traditional English education at that time. Welldon, though, thought Winston had some academic potential, as he provided him with extra private tuition in Latin and Greek in the hope that he might improve, but it was to no avail. Welldon would maintain his personal attachment to Winston long after he had left Harrow, and corresponded with him regularly during his years as a young soldier fighting for the British Empire in India. Of the four and a half years Winston spent at Harrow, three were in the Army Class, and he made steady progress, eventually being made a lance corporal in the school cadet force. By the age of seventeen, despite the constant episodes of ill health Winston suffered as a schoolboy, he demonstrated that he was not totally without athletic ability by winning the Public Schools Fencing Championship – a useful attribute for someone who would soon be engaged in the primitive form of warfare practised by Afghan warriors. 'His success', we learn in the *Harrovian*, the school magazine, 'was chiefly due to his quick and dashing attack, which quite took his opponents by surprise.'[19]

So far as Churchill's academic potential was concerned, his father's misgivings about his ability were proved correct. In the later Victorian period official England demanded success in the aforementioned Latin, Greek and Mathematics, and proficiency

in such subjects was the benchmark for entry into the foreign and civil services. The army's entrance requirements were lower. Winston's poor performance in Mathematics meant that he could not even contemplate going on to Woolwich, the academy for cadets seeking commissions in the Royal Artillery or Royal Engineers. Instead he had to settle for the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, the military institution for would-be infantry and cavalry officers. Despite working ten hours a day to prepare himself for Sandhurst, he failed miserably to pass the entrance examination in the summer of 1892, not even achieving sufficient marks to enter the cavalry, which set the lowest standard. He came 390th out of 693 candidates, although he did come 18th out of the 400 who took the English History paper. Nor did he fare much better when he retook the Sandhurst exam in November, even though Welldon, who had come to admire his pupil's dogged persistence, noted prior to the examination, 'he has done all that could be asked of him'.[20]

Winston failed again, but there was a significant improvement in his overall score. He had just celebrated his eighteenth birthday and, in his desperation to pursue a military career, left Harrow and enrolled at a crammer in West London specializing in getting dim young men into Sandhurst. The crammer prided itself on its 'renowned system of intensive poultry farming' – learning by rote. But it worked, and Winston finally passed at the third attempt in June 1893. Even then he just scraped through the examination, and did not receive sufficient marks to join the infantry, so had to settle for the cavalry. Winston was nonetheless triumphant, and wrote to his father that he was 'glad to be able to send you good news'. But in return he received a coruscating rebuke from Lord Randolph, whose infirmity had reached the point where he could no longer finish his speeches in the Commons. Lord Randolph had set his heart on Winston joining the infantry, and was keen that he be commissioned into the 60th Rifles, for which Prince George, the Duke of Cambridge, the Queen's first cousin and commander-

in-chief of the British army, had recommended him. 'I am rather surprised at your tone of exultation over your inclusion in the Sandhurst list,' he wrote from the German spa resort of Kissingen. 'There are two ways of winning an examination, one creditable, the other the reverse. You have unfortunately chosen the latter method, and appear to be much pleased by your success.' By failing to get into the infantry Winston had 'demonstrated beyond refutation your slovenly, happy-go-lucky harum scarum style of work for which you have always been distinguished at your various schools'. Lord Randolph was concerned about the family's ability to pay the extra costs incurred by joining the cavalry, which included the purchase and maintenance of at least one horse. 'By accomplishing the prodigious effort of getting into the Cavalry, you imposed on me an extra charge of some £200 a year,' he sarcastically remarked.[21] To placate his father, Winston managed to secure an infantry cadetship after one of the other applicants dropped out, but this still failed to mollify his father's anger.

On enrolment at Sandhurst in September 1893, Churchill was told that he would need to overcome his physical shortcomings if he were to qualify for graduation. At a little over five feet six inches tall and with a chest measurement of just thirty-one inches, his physique was more akin to that of a racing jockey than a potential cavalry officer. Indeed, the one-piece 'siren suit' that the Jermyn Street tailor Turnbull and Asser made for him during the Second World War, one of which today is displayed at Blenheim Palace, looks more like a romper suit for a large child that the attire of Britain's greatest wartime prime minister.

Lord Randolph's rebuke certainly made an impression on Churchill, and he endeavoured to make the best of his new career at Sandhurst. Rather than being late for everything, which had been his custom at school, Churchill made it his habit to arrive at least five minutes early. He immersed himself in his studies, and wrote to his parents 'The work is very

interesting and extremely practical', although he was scathing of the academy's 'dilapidated and tobacco-smelling rooms'. He learned to shoot both rifle and revolver, and was among a group of cadets who were allowed to fire the army's new 12-pounder gun. At the start of the eighteen-month course he was still dogged by ill health, and had to be helped off the parade ground after he collapsed following a particularly demanding march, prompting him to rue that 'I am cursed with so feeble a body.'[22]

But Winston thrived at Sandhurst, to the extent that he passed the first set of examinations in all of the five compulsory subjects: Fortification, Tactics, Topography, Military Law and Military Administration. In later life Churchill remembered his time at Sandhurst with fondness, saying it was a period of learning and comradeship. 'In contrast with my schooldays I had made many friends, three or four of whom still survive.' But this was a generation of young British officers for whom living to a ripe old age, as Churchill did, would be the exception, rather than the norm. Some of Churchill's direct contemporaries at Sandhurst were killed in the Boer War, but the majority perished during the First World War when Churchill himself, following his resignation from the government over the Dardanelles fiasco, volunteered to serve for a brief spell in the trenches. 'The few that have survived have been pierced through thigh or breast or face by the bullets of the enemy. I salute them all.'[23]

Horses, though, were Churchill's greatest pleasure at Sandhurst, which was just as well as he needed to draw on all his horsemanship skills when fighting on the North-West Frontier. In addition to the time he spent at Sandhurst's riding school he attended a specialist course at Knightsbridge Barracks with the Royal Horse Guards. Afterwards, when he succeeded in fulfilling his dream of joining a cavalry regiment, he undertook another full five-month course, so that by the time he set off for Afghanistan 'I was pretty well trained to sit and manage a horse'.[24] He and his friends at Sandhurst spent all their money hiring horses from the local livery stables, running up bills on

the strength of their future commissions. 'We organised point-to-points and even a steeplechase in the park of a friendly grandee, and bucketed gaily about the countryside,' he recalled. 'No hour of life is lost that is spent in the saddle. Young men have often been ruined through owning horses, or through backing horses, but never through riding them; unless of course they break their necks, which, taken at a gallop, is a very good death to die.'[25] Churchill's great enthusiasm for equestrian pursuits paid off when he took part in Sandhurst's end-of-course Riding examination and came second out of 127 cadets. The frequent horse riding, combined with Sandhurst's demanding regime of drill and physical training, had helped him to overcome his frail physique, and he passed out from Sandhurst a fit young man with an excellent cadet record. Although he had entered Sandhurst near the bottom of the class, a lowly 92nd out of an intake of 102, his place in the final order of merit was 8th out of a class of 150, and he did particularly well in the final exams for Tactics, Drill and Gymnastics, as well as Riding.[26]

Despite his indifferent performance in getting into Sandhurst, Churchill is the only one of his generation whose name today is commemorated with a building named in his honour. Churchill Hall, a modern 1,200-seat complex used for lectures and presentations, is one of the newer buildings on the Sandhurst estate. The cadets' mess in the Old College building, which was built in the early nineteenth century and where Winston dined in the 1890s, is now the Indian Army Memorial Room, dedicated to the exploits of British soldiers who served on the subcontinent. The display cabinets around the walls are filled with various cups and trophies from regimental polo competitions, while the stained-glass windows honour its most notable campaigns, including Afghanistan, Burma, Palestine and the First and Second World Wars. There is not much use for the Riding School at the back of the Old College, where Churchill learned his riding skills, as modern British cavalry

officers are more likely to be found driving tanks on Salisbury Plain than honing their equestrian prowess. It is mainly used by the local pony club, while only a few of the cadets can afford to maintain the academy's distinguished polo-playing tradition.

Churchill's impressive performance at Sandhurst should have allayed his father's fears about his commitment to pursuing a military career, but by the time he had completed his military training Lord Randolph's health was in rapid decline. His father's illness cast a dark shadow over Churchill's time at Sandhurst, although it was not until the final months of his cadetship that he was informed of its seriousness. Churchill, still bruised by the intemperate letter he had received on gaining entry to Sandhurst, remained wary of his father, although in the last year of his life Lord Randolph confided his pride in the noticeable improvement he had detected in Winston's conduct once he had become a gentleman cadet. Shortly after Winston enrolled at Sandhurst Lord Randolph took his son to Tring in Hertfordshire to visit the country home of Nathaniel Rothschild, the renowned Victorian banker and socialite who, at the age of forty-four, had become Britain's first Jewish peer in 1885. 'Natty', as he was known among his circle of aristocratic friends, was a close acquaintance of the Churchills, and later took a personal interest in Winston's career. After the Tring visit Lord Randolph wrote of Winston, 'He has much smartened up. He holds himself quite upright and he has got steadier. The people at Tring took a great deal of notice of him but he was very quiet and nice-mannered.'[27]

As Churchill was passing out from Sandhurst it was evident that Lord Randolph's health was in terminal decline. A hastily arranged world tour designed to improve his strength had to be cut short when Lord Randolph became so disorientated while visiting Sri Lanka that he had to be put in a straitjacket. The two of them eventually returned to the family home in Grosvenor Square. Lord Randolph 'lingered pitifully' for another month, Winston recalled, as he battled against 'General Paralysis', the

term used by the Prince of Wales's personal physician to describe the final manifestation of syphilis, which reduces the patient to a state of mental incapacitation. For the final month of his life Randolph could speak only with difficulty, slept fitfully and survived on occasional sips of coffee because he could hardly swallow. The agonizing pain he suffered was relieved by heavy doses of morphine. In early January there was a brief improvement in his physical condition, but his mental deterioration was so advanced that Jennie, who, in spite of the couple's strained relationship, nursed him attentively, wrote that 'even his own mother wishes now that he had died the other day'. At one point Randolph rallied briefly when Winston paid him a visit and asked how he had got on with his Sandhurst exams. 'That's all right,' he commented when Winston informed him of his commendable performance.[28]

Lord Randolph died quietly at 6.15 on the morning of 24 January 1895, three weeks before his forty-sixth birthday. Winston himself died on the very same day seventy years later. On the morning of his father's death Winston had been sleeping at a nearby house, and 'ran in the darkness across Grosvenor Square, then lapped in snow', when told that his father was dying.[29] By the time the first relatives arrived to comfort Jennie, Winston was already reading the sympathetic telegrams. The Prince of Wales wrote a formal letter of condolence, as did George Curzon, an up-and-coming Tory politician who, as Lord Curzon, was soon to be appointed Viceroy and Governor General of India, with responsibility for maintaining the peace on India's problematic border with Afghanistan. Curzon wrote to Jennie, 'Everyone says how tenderly and heroically you have behaved throughout . . . you did all that lay in your power.' The Duke of Cambridge, another close family friend and the head of Britain's armed forces, wrote from his holiday villa in the south of France of his 'deep sympathy and sorrow at the great loss you and your family have sustained in the death of poor Randolph, the chief consolation being that his sufferings were I

fear great and that the end was a consequent relief to himself and even to those who constantly watched over and surrounded him'.[30]

The family was understandably secretive about the cause of Lord Randolph's death, though rumours abounded throughout London society as to the true nature of his illness. A funeral was swiftly arranged, and the service was held at Westminster Abbey three days later. An indication of the Churchill family's continued ostracism from the highest rankings of the court was reflected in the non-attendance of Queen Victoria and Gladstone, the two great national figures of the era. Lord Salisbury, who was primarily responsible for ending Lord Randolph's political career, did attend, and the coffin was taken from the Abbey to the slow movement of the Dead March from Handel's *Saul*. Lord Randolph was buried later that day in the churchyard at Bladon, a small village just beyond the family estate at Blenheim, where Winston is also buried. 'Over the landscape brilliant with sunshine,' Churchill recalled of the funeral, 'snow had spread a glittering pall.' Winston certainly approved of his father's final resting place. When he visited the graveyard six months after the burial service he wrote to his mother, 'The hot sun of the last few days has dried up the grass a little – but the rose bushes are in full bloom and make the churchyard very bright. I was struck by the sense of quietness and peace as well as the old world air of the place – that my sadness was not unmixed with solace. It is the spot of all others he would have chosen.'[31]

Lord Randolph's death had a profound impact on Churchill, who, at the age of twenty, suddenly found himself the head of a relatively impoverished family with a somewhat tarnished reputation. Lord Randolph's spectacular fall from high political office resulted in the Churchill family acquiring a reputation for mental instability. So far as Winston was concerned, his father's premature death instilled in him the firm belief that Churchills died young. He had no time to waste. Moreover, he

was determined to restore the Churchill name, which had suffered badly through the failure of his father's political career, to its rightful glory. And what better way to prove himself than to volunteer to fight on a remote and inhospitable frontier of the British Empire.