Collier's
THE NATIONAL WEEKLY
FOR SEPTEMBER 20, 1941

Dinner with Churchill

By
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CABLED FROM LONDON

THE man from Scotland Yard had his watch out. The train was waiting patiently enough. In three minutes it would be nine o'clock. The stationmaster stood there nervously. His job was to see that trains left Paddington Station on time, even special trains.

"He'll be late," the stationmaster grumbled. "'He always is. And the train all ready and the tracks cleared all the way down."

"He'll make it," the man from Scotland Yard said complacently. "You can go to sleep on that, laddie. He's always late for dinners and for appointments, but never for trains."

Paddington Station was almost deserted. The brilliant morning sunlight filtered through the open spaces of a roof that had once been glass. We stood there beside the train, and then silently, almost casually, two large black cars drove up. Averell Harriman, the American minister, climbed out of one. Winston Churchill, prime minister of England, climbed out of the other. He was smiling, and when Churchill smiles he smiles with his eyes as well as with his lips. When he saw the Scotland Yard man standing there with his watch in hand, the smile broke into a laugh. He glanced up at the big station clock. It read eight-fifty-nine. Churchill shook hands all around. He has the same phenomenal memory for names that Jim Farley has.

"Get in," he said. "We'll get going right away. In with you."

He ushered us all into the train. He stepped in last of all. As he boarded the train, the clock struck nine. Churchill had made it on time. There were only nine of us—Harriman; Commander Thompson, the prime minister's aide de camp; General Sir Hastings Ismey; Major John Churchill, the prime minister's brother; two American generals in London as observers; Churchill's two secretaries, Mr. Martin and Mrs. Hill;

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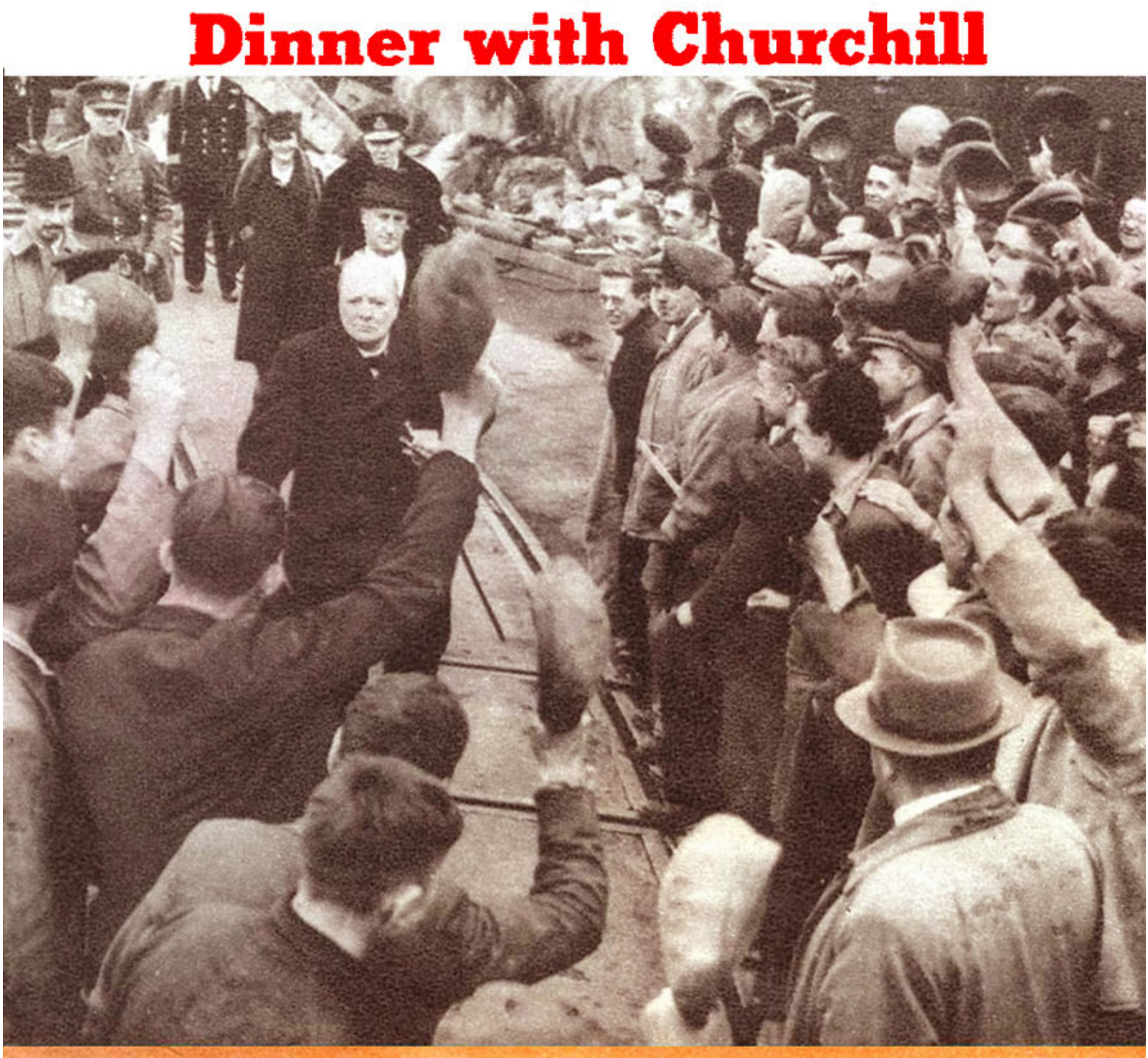

The prime minister visits a Plymouth naval establishment after a German air raid and is cheered by workers. Such spontaneous demonstrations for "Winston," who is everybody's hero, have been common throughout England

and myself. This special train that was taking us to some tank maneuvers some two hundred miles from London was very comfortable. The prime minister is the perfect host. If he is in his office, in his home or on a train he must play the host. He enjoys seeing that everyone is comfortable; that everyone has a cigar or a cool drink.

"It's awfully hot today. Let's take off our coats," he said, and then he retired to the farther end of the car with his two secretaries, who had the morning mail with them.

Churchill the statesman is well known to the world. Churchill the writer, Churchill the war leader of Britain, Churchill the orator—these Churchills are familiar wherever newsprint is made, wherever men read and write. I speak of another Churchill who is not so well known. I speak of Winston Churchill the man.

Winston Churchill has kept a nation of forty-four million in fighting mood now for nearly two years. Churchill, who is called "Winston" by three quarters of Britain, is worshiped in every army encampment, in every R.A.F. mess, in every wardroom of his majesty's navy, and in every pub in Britain. In his own time he is becoming a legend; a legend that threatens to obscure the human, flesh and blood man who bears the name; a legend that threatens to obscure one of the most fascinating personalities of our time. This, then, is a record of that personality. It is not an "interview" with the prime minister. He is too busy to give interviews, and his sense of fairness long ago forced him to make the rule of "no interviews." If he couldn't give an interview to all, he wouldn't give it to one. But I spent two days with him, and this story is of the Winston Churchill I got to know well in forty-eight hours.

It was a pleasant trip, and the luncheon on the train was good. It wasn't as good as one would get on any decent train in America, but even the prime minister and his guests are rationed in England. And, of course, the cigars were excellent. Averell Harriman and I sat and talked of our friends in New York; and the train slipped through the lovely countryside that was wearing its brilliant summer dress, and then finally the train stopped. The prime minister had been talking about tanks to the two American Army officers. It was hot when the train stopped.

"Where are we, Tommy?" the prime minister called to his aide, who is "Tommy" to all of us in London.

"Three minutes from the station, sir," Tommy said, disconsolately. "The heat has swollen the switch points and there's

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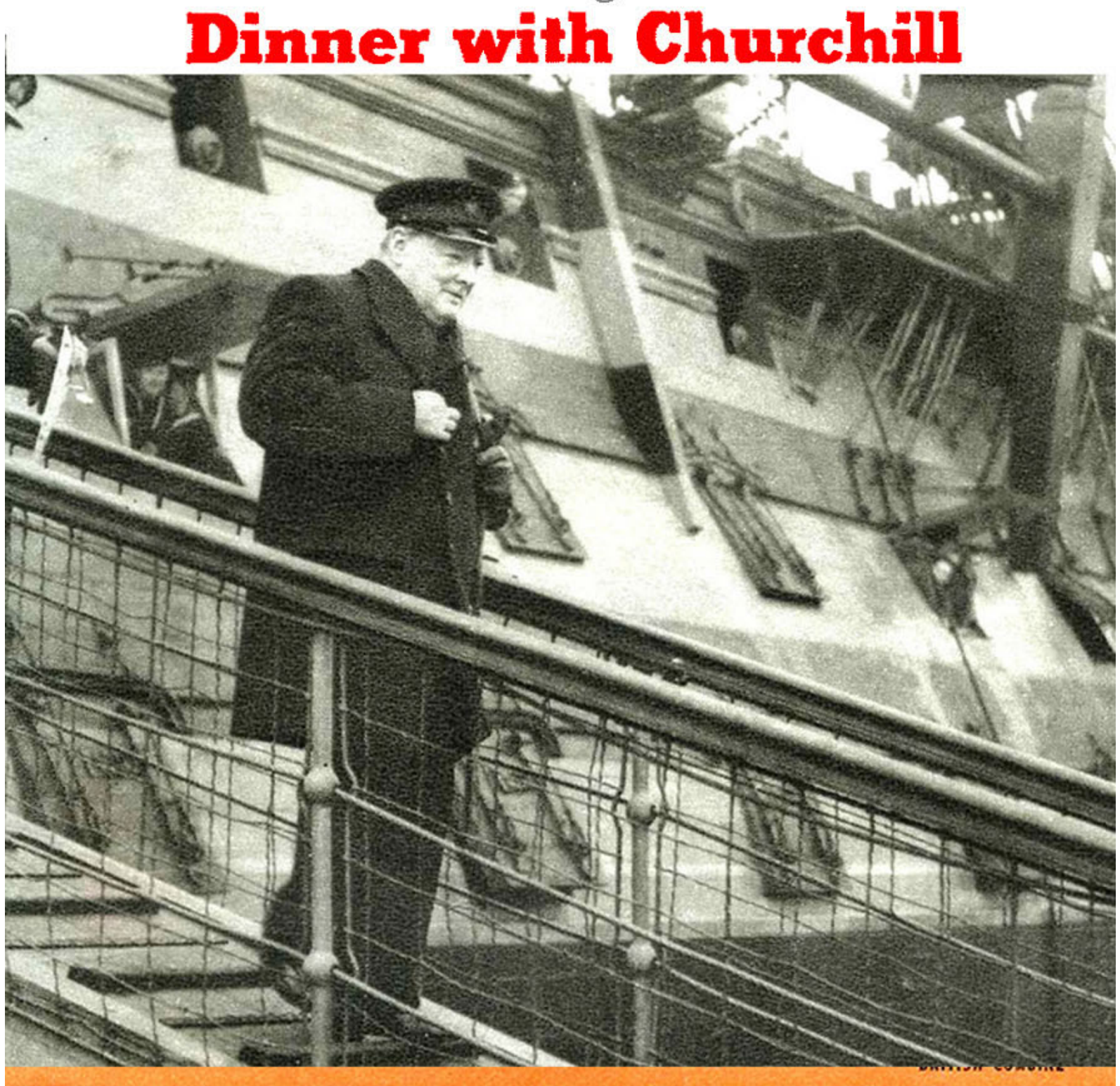

At Portsmouth with Admiral Sir William James after a bombing. Ship in background is Nelson's famous Victory. Below, with high-ranking army officials, Churchill inspects England's first-line coastal defenses

something wrong. They'll have things fixed in two minutes."

Churchill looked at Commander Thompson as though it were all his fault.

"Ah, Tommy, Tommy," he said reproachfully, "it's very hot in here."

Happily the train moved on, and a major crisis in the Churchill official family was averted.

A Soldier's Big Moment

The visit of the prime minister to any army encampment is an event. This was an extra-special event. New tanks had just been delivered to this camp. Today the men were to show off their prowess in mimic warfare—a warfare that may emerge from mimic to reality before these lines appear. Five thousand uniformed men were drawn up at the station when we stepped off the train. They wore the black berets of the tank men—a beret is well adapted to the limited confines of a tank. Cars were drawn up on the station platform. The general and his staff were at attention and they saluted sharply as Churchill left the train. The rest of us were hot, but his light blue summer-weight suit wasn't even wrinkled and his smile was eager as he shook hands with the officers. Each one of us had to be introduced. For the moment we were his family. Churchill oozes friendliness. It is awfully difficult not to start calling him "Winston" after knowing him for two hours. This implies no disrespect. It is merely the amazing capacity and power he has of making you feel that here is a friend you have known a long time.

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"I suppose they've been standing here a long time," he said, pointing to the lines of soldiers standing rigidly at attention. "Let's walk along and say hello to them."

The general could hardly restrain his delight. The rest of us groaned. We had to trail along, walking up and down the lines. The prime minister, apparently unaware of the heat, smiled and chatted with the men as he walked along, and you knew that each one of them would treasure this moment; each felt that Winston had come down from London just to see him. Finally it was over, and we climbed into cars. The "battlefield" was five miles away. Everything was ready when we arrived. We were given maps and the general explained the problem. The Germans, in strong numbers, held a hill some four miles away. This division had the job of capturing it. The mock battle began. Real shells and bullets were used. The shells tore huge holes in the plains in front of the hill. And the smoke hid the hill entirely. Then, far to the right, a group of light tanks emerged. Another came from the left. They fired as they advanced. Infantry followed them.

The Warrior Loves a Battle

We had seats on a hill commanding a view of the entire proceedings, but Churchill didn't use his seat. This was action. This was his dish. His eyes sparkled, and he chortled with glee while one shell after another exploded on "enemy" territory. He bit his cigar savagely; he blew huge columns of smoke into the summer air, now acrid with the smell of gunpowder, and once when a shell fell short only some 200 yards from us, he laughed out loud. He was away from his desk. He was away from the stuffy confines of Parliament and cabinet meetings. Once again he was a young war correspondent in Africa, smelling gunpowder, being part of the show. There was more gunfire this afternoon than I'd heard in France during a month at the front. It was finally over, and Churchill looked disconsolate. He could have watched this for hours. Then we inspected the tanks.

Now, I can take a tank or leave it alone. Not Churchill or Harriman. Harriman has become a great authority on tanks. Several of these were American-made, and Harriman had to explain the inner workings of the ugly monsters to us. Churchill discussed the technical details of the tanks on even terms with the experts. I just wanted to get back to the train, where I hoped I might find a cold glass of beer. Finally we headed for it. We drove through five miles of cheering troops. Their cheers were not the conventional "three cheers for the prime minister." They were full-throated, spontaneous cheers of welcome and of friendship to their commander in chief. Churchill smiled, and then at the station, when a military band played "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," he took off his hat and waved it, and you could see that for the moment the cares of being prime minister had slipped away.

On the train once more, he again reluctantly became the prime minister of England: He went into a huddle with his secretaries; he dictated letter after letter; he worked on a speech he was to make in the house four days hence. He worked in his shirt sleeves, and one cigar after another died under vigorous

puffing. And then we pulled into Waterloo Station.

"Come to lunch tomorrow," he said unexpectedly. "A friend of yours will be down—Harry Hopkins. Can you make it?"

"I can make it," I said gravely. Reporters can usually make it when asked to lunch by prime ministers.

He was spending this week end at his ancient, ivy-covered country home. August had come to England, and roses, carnations and marigolds blossomed in her tumbling hair. This rural section of England seemed literally alive with flowers.

I was twenty minutes late for luncheon, which is hardly the way to win the friendship of a prime minister. But he didn't seem to mind. Neither did lovely, white-haired Mrs. Churchill. Mrs. Churchill is one of the world's loveliest-looking women. Her hair is white and her cheeks are ivory-tinted, and she looks as though she had just stepped out of a cameo. Pretty eighteen-year-old daughter Mary, vivacious and eager-eyed, didn't mind either. Only Sukie seemed annoyed. He barked and leaped and in general just behaved as any young puppy would behave at the intrusion of a stranger into the family circle. "He's a Free French poodle," Mary explained proudly. "Have you a dog?"

I told her that the Savoy Hotel where I lived took a very dim view of guests who kept dogs.

"Have you a cat?" she asked. I told her that my secretary took a very dim view of cats, and I had to choose between her and a cat. And after all, I explained, a cat can't take dictation.

"I have goldfish, though," I told Mary.

"I shouldn't think they'd be much fun," Mary said thoughtfully.

Mr. Churchill Agrees, But—

Winston and Harry Hopkins were talking production. It is hardly the prerogative of a guest to report the conversation of his host. But then, this story is not concerned with what Churchill said; it is concerned with the man himself. What manner of man is he? He and Harry argued happily.

When Harry made a statement, Winston would lean back and say thoughtfully, "You know, friend Hopkins, you could make a good case against that. Now for instance . . . " Then, having made a good case against Harry's statement, he would add mischievously, "Of course, I don't believe a word of what I've been saying. I agree with you entirely. I just wanted to see if I could make a case against it." After lunch, Mary had to rush to the hospital where she works. The Churchills all work. Sister Sarah, an actress, gives troops' concerts. Brother Randolph is in Egypt with his regiment. Mrs. Churchill heads a dozen committees doing war work; she works in a canteen and she is on duty as a fire-watcher near Downing Street two nights a week.

Churchill, Hopkins, Thompson and I walked out of the house. It was difficult to believe that this wasn't Long Island, or Connecticut or even Beverly Hills. There was a badminton court and a lawn studded with croquet wickets.

"Harriman would go crazy about this court," I said. "He loves croquet. He and Bob Sherwood play it by the hour."

"Mary gave him a beating here the other day," Winston chuckled.

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Light rain began to fall. Churchill doesn't notice minor things like the weather. He was dressed for it. He was wearing what his staff call his "rompers." This is what we usually call a "shelter suit." It is a one-piece all-over garment with a zipper. He always wears it in the country. He also wears it because he is a great one for prowling around at night. Especially on blitz nights. More than once, a fireman has looked up and seen the bulky figure of the prime minister standing there in the glare of the flames watching.

In the afternoon the prime minister worked with his secretaries, who go everywhere with him. Mrs. Hill, Martin and "Tommy" are indispensable to him. Always one of them is within shouting distance.

I wandered about the house with Tommy and Harry Hopkins. We went into one enormous room where Winston keeps his toys. Here is the largest globe of the world I've ever seen. Churchill loves to twirl it around, finding places where his armies are fighting, and when he does this, you can tell by the look in his eyes that he wishes he were there. Then there is a refined mechanical edition of the old-fashioned stereopticon. Here pictures of bombed German cities are shown. On his desk was a book, one book. It was the history of the Washington family in England; Churchill reads everything, including the comic strips in the papers, but most of all he prefers biographies.

"The PM wants you to stay for dinner," Thompson said.

"I have no dinner clothes with me," I protested.

Tommy laugned. "Do you think that will worry the PM? And you know Mrs. Churchill. She doesn't worry about what people wear."

We assembled in the big high-ceilinged hall before dinner. This room was probably 500 years old. Portraits of great figures of the past crowded the walls. You seldom have cocktails in England. There are no lemons, no limes, and practically no vermouth left. We had our choice of sherry or whisky. Hopkins had double-crossed me and had put on a dinner coat. So had Thompson and Martin, who were dining with us. The prime minister wore a new set of "rompers." Mrs. Churchill had a slight cold and she was resting. Mary was the hostess tonight, and she played her part beautifully.

"I feel like a French refugee in these clothes," I said to Mary.

"How about Pa?" she laughed. "Look at his clothes!"

"It's easy to see," Winston chuckled, looking at our dinner-jacketed companions, "which two men in the room worked all afternoon. Mary, where's Nelson?"

Mary didn't have to answer. For from out of the dark recesses of a corner there strode a cat—Nelson. Nelson is a huge, baleful-eyed black cat, who ignores everyone else but tolerates the prime minister. He takes a rather patronizing view of him, but occasionally allows Churchill to stroke him, and when there are no dogs around to chase, Nelson even listens to the PM's attempt to draw him into conversation.

"Bravest cat you ever saw," Churchill laughed. "Once chased a big dog right out of the admiralty. He sleeps through bombings and doesn't mind the guns. Come here, Nelson, old boy."

Nelson yawned, and then humored the prime minister to the extent of allowing himself to be patted on the head. Then he stalked majestically into the dining room.

"Nelson knows we're having salmon for dinner," Mary said. "He's hoping

that Pa will feed him."

It was fun at dinner. We didn't talk much about the war. We talked about Mary, who had just enlisted in the A.T.S. She is to go on active service with an antiaircraft battery—and that means active service.

"Did you have any trouble getting permission from your father?" I asked her.

"No," she said proudly. "He doesn't mind."

It was a cozy family dinner. The Churchills all have the knack of making you feel at home, making you feel a member of the family. We talked of many things—of food, which is topic Number One all over England, and of the cigarette shortage. Churchill chuckled, "Thank goodness," he said, "I smoke only cigars." We talked of moving pictures (both Churchill and Beaverbrook are fans) and, inevitably, of the war.

After dinner Mary left us to the port and the cigars. She kissed her father goodby. "Don't be long," she pleaded. "I so want to see the picture. It's that wonderful Target for Tonight — the bombing picture. If you love me, you'll hurry."

"I am very fond of you," he said gravely, and Mary, satisfied that he would be there, left.

"That's the greatest example of understatement I ever heard," I told him.

"I find understatement very effective at times;" he laughed, "very effective indeed."

A report came about the sinking of an Italian destroyer. Churchill chuckled happily. He has made no secret of his contempt for the Italians.

"Tommy," he said, "have you got that letter about the Italians? Good, good. Let me read it. It is a letter to Charles Colebaugh, managing editor of Collier's Weekly. It is from W. B. Courtney, his correspondent who was then with the Italians in Ethiopia. Best letter I ever read."

He read the letter, and Hopkins laughed. Thompson roared; Churchill himself had to stop several times to repeat lines he liked especially. The letter is really one of the all-time classics of invective.

"Have some copies of that made, Tommy," Churchill grinned. "We'll pass 'em round."

Over our cigars and port, which nobody drank because there was also brandy, and brandy gets scarcer every day in England, we talked of the war, and of after the war, and Churchill talked of governmental problems of the present and of the future. He talked freely, as one who knows and trusts his guests. Nor did he ever preface what he said with the usual, "This is off the record, of course," which we reporters hear so often. But a guest at the prime minister's has the same self-imposed responsibility which a guest at the White House has. But one can quote a word or two.

An Optimist at Heart

"Things have been looking up a bit lately," the prime minister said. His voice is the same in conversation as it is in his speeches. It has the same slight lisp—if that word can be applied to anyone as virile as Winston Churchill; the same long, beautifully rounded sentences; the occasional armchair phrase; the by now perhaps unconscious use of alliteration as an aid to description. He talked of the dark days after Dunkirk and his face clouded at the remembrance.

"Oh, we have a long way to go," he said thoughtfully. "But with the help of our great friends across the sea, we'll get there. I expect that we'll get it badly in London again and again, but, mind you, every time they come over, our night fighters will be taking huge bites out of them. I am not overoptimistic, I hope. But then, I am at heart an optimistic person."

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His conversation was like a chameleon on a rock. It darted back into antiquity; it touched on Greece and that reminded him of a canto in Don Juan and he talked of Byron; it somehow streaked halfway across the world to India, and that reminded him of Kipling.

"I've gotten a lot from Kipling," he said enthusiastically. "Ah, there was a singer of songs. But, of course, there was only one. I mean Shakespeare. Do you remember in Hamlet when—"

It was fun, it was exciting to hear Winston Churchill recite Shakespeare. On and on his sonorous voice rolled. He was acting the part now. He was Hamlet, and not a word in a long passage did he miss.

"Not one real poet has emerged from the war as yet, do you think?" Harry Hopkins asked.

Churchill shook his head. "No, and very few from the last war. But there was one who died too soon. Rupert Brooke. Do you remember that lovely thing he wrote called The Fish?

" '*In a cool curving world he lies*
And ripples with dark ecstasies.'

"And further on"—Churchill's eyes were blazing with enthusiasm now; he loved this poem, "those lines—

" '*The dark fire leaps along his blood;*
Dateless and deathless, blind and still,
The intricate impulse works its will;
His woven world drops back; and he,
Sans providence, sans memory,
Unconscious and directly driven,
Fades to some dank sufficient heaven.'

"And how about these lines to apply today?" Churchill chuckled. "Can you fit them to anyone:

" '*But there the night is close, and there*
Darkness is cold and strange and bare;
And the secret depths are whisperless. . . .'

"That was a poet," Churchill said softly. "Ah, yes. And he, you'll remember," he said sharply, "was killed by the Hun."

Surcease from the War

He went on, and something Hopkins said awakened a memory of Thomas Moore, and from the store of that incredible memory there came forth stanza after stanza of Moore. And then, amazingly, Bret Harte, and he laughed because neither Hopkins nor I could recall the passages he quoted. Outside of this quiet dining room, dominated by the resonant, insinuating voice; outside of this personality that dominated the room the way a sunrise dominates a dawn—there was bloody, murderous war going on. But for the moment we had declared a moratorium on terror and bloodshed and governmental problems. I'd even forgotten that I was a reporter. The eternal muse, who will live long beyond the memory of this war, was queen for the moment.

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And then.

"But Mary will be waiting," Churchill said ruefully. In the long run, fathers, even prime ministers, are always bossed by their eighteen-year-old daughters. We went upstairs to the room where a projection booth had been installed. The picture was Target for Tonight—we all agreed that it was the best picture to come out of the war. Target for Tonight is the honest, sincere story of the bomber pilots. Churchill smoked and was as tense as any movie fan when things looked bad for the bomber that was over Germany. He chuckled when the bombs hit the Nazi target; he breathed with relief when the pilots returned safely.

Downstairs again, Thompson said that my car was ready. The prime minister walked to the door with me. It was a dark night. The rain still slanted down dismally.

"Sure now you won't have a drink before you go?" he asked solicitously. "It's a chilly night. No? It's been nice having you. You must come again. Let me know when you go to Moscow. Good night."

The car pulled away. I looked back. Just for the moment the prime minister had forgotten the black-out. He stood there in the huge Gothic doorway. He stood there and the dim light from the hall silhouetted him—sturdy, rocklike, immovable. He stuck his cigar in the corner of his mouth at a jaunty angle. His hands were dug deep into the pockets of his blue "rompers." He waved once and grinned. I, too, like a man who grins when he fights.

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