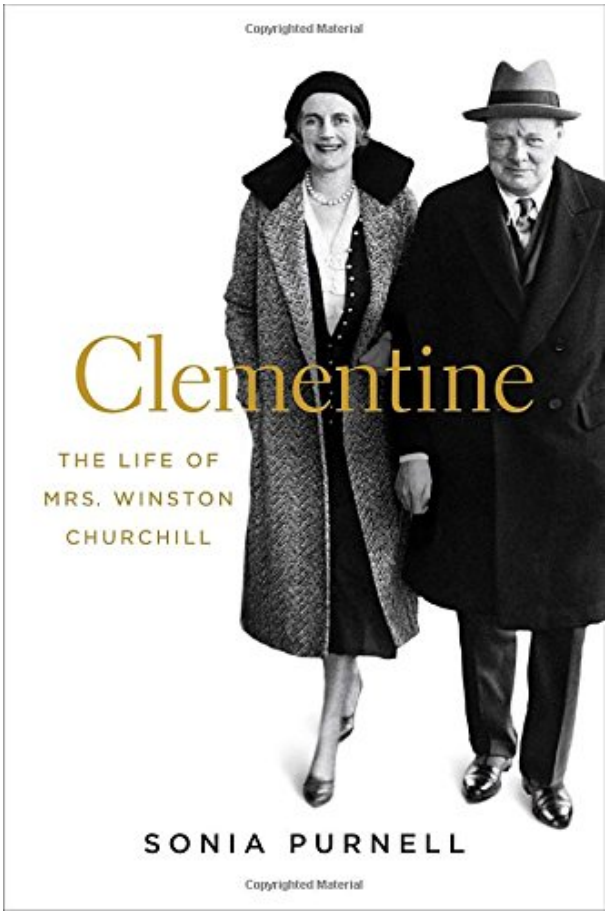
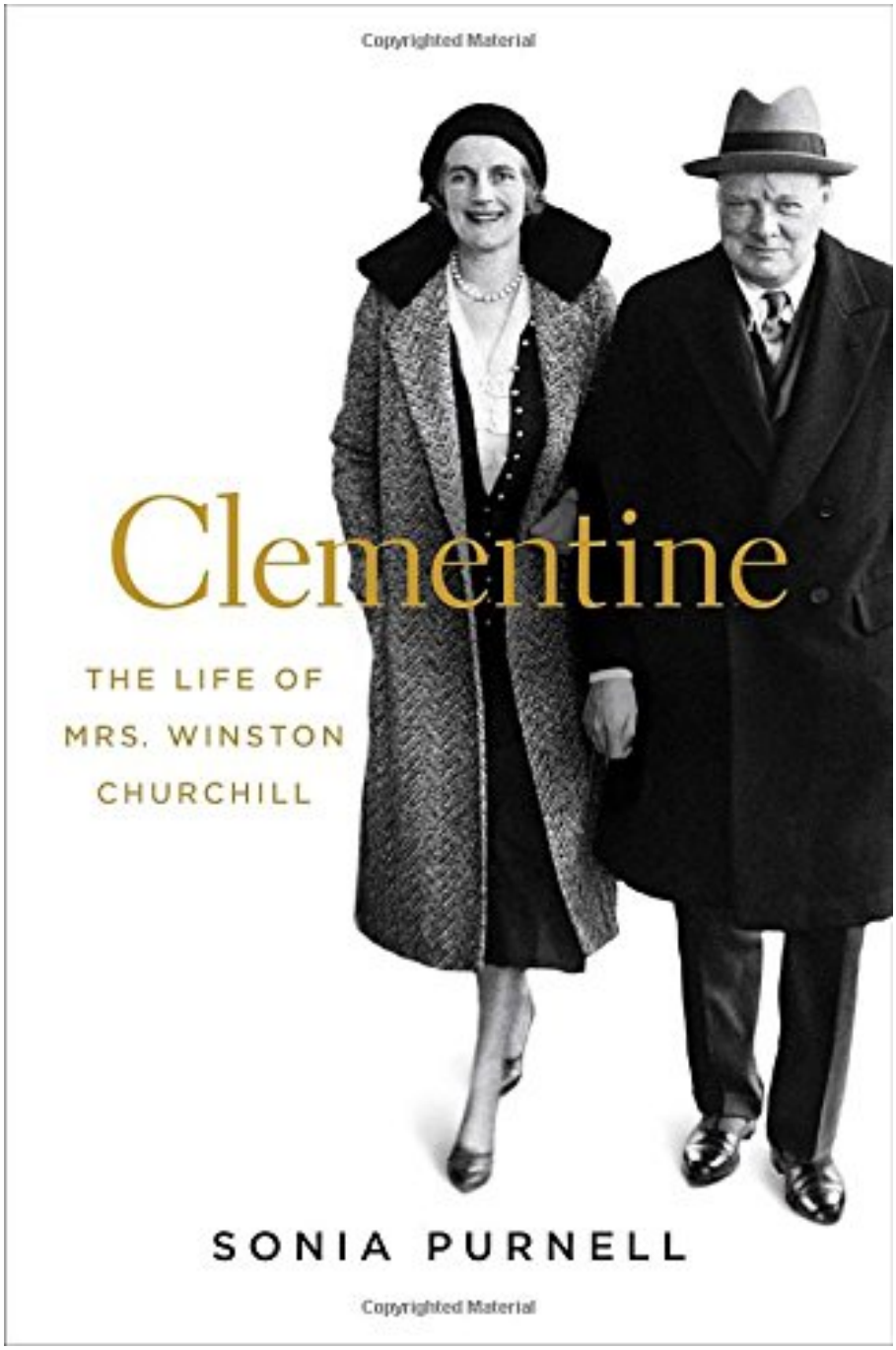
CLEMENTINE: THE LIFE OF MRS. WINSTON CHURCHILL BY SONIA PURNELL





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Review
“Engrossing. . . . Purnell’s book is the first formal biography of a woman who has heretofore been relegated to the sidelines.”
–The New York Times

"Winston Churchill kept nothing from Clementine. "You know,"he informed FDR, "I tell Clemmie everything." Purnell has delivered an astute, pacey account of a woman who hardly ever emerged from the shadows. It is a sharp analysis of what it meant to be a politician's wife. . . [and] shows how much we can learn about Winston Churchill from his wife and marriage."
–The Wall Street Journal

“Thorough and engaging. . . Purnell’s extensive and insightful biography offers a much welcome portrait of Clementine Churchill, a woman whose remarkable life has long been overshadowed by her famous husband.”
—Washington Post

"Until this biography, Clementine’s influence had been completely overlooked and undervalued by Winston's biographers. Clementine was a complicated, mercurial figure, and Purnell does a wonderful job painting a full picture of a woman who was an excellent wife, a mediocre at best mother, and privy to some of the most profound moments of the modern era.
—Jessica Grose, in Lena Dunham's Lenny Letter

“Fascinating… [Purnell's] book may leave you thinking Clementine is one of the most underrated, complex women in British history.”
–The Daily Beast

“Sonia Purnell’s fine biography. . . brings out of the shadows this formidable woman who was much more than strictly a spouse.”
—Newsday

“A fascinating and well-written account of a woman who played a key role in many pivotal moments of early-20th-century British and world politics.”
—Minneapolis Star-Tribune

“A sharply drawn, absorbing portrait of Churchill’s elegant, strong-willed wife, who was also his adviser, supporter, protector, and manager. . . Purnell argues persuasively for Clementine's importance to history: she functioned as her husband's astute political strategist; insisted that he consider her feminist views; vetted his speeches; and campaigned for his successes. . . A riveting, illuminating life of a remarkable woman.
–Kirkus Reviews (Starred Review)

“[A] probing, well-researched and wise biography.”
—Washington Times

“This exemplary biography illustrates how Clementine’s intelligence, hard work, and perseverance in often difficult circumstances made her every bit a match for her remarkable, intimidating husband, and a fascinating figure in her own right.”
—Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)

“The extensive research shines a deserved spotlight on Britain’s first lady through wartime and beyond."
—Fort Worth Star-Telegram

“Purnell does a remarkable job of proving that Clementine had a large impact on Winston’s life. . . He seems to have known immediately upon meeting her that she would be the one who could support his great ambitions and moderate his mood swings and gambling. . . She edited his writing, advised him on political decisions, and volunteered in many ways throughout both world wars. Her significance, in many way, can be compared to that of Eleanor Roosevelt.”
--Library Journal

“Sonia Purnell has restored Clementine Churchill to her rightful place in history. Behind every great man there is a great woman–and this was especially true of Winston Churchill.Clementine is a fascinating portrait of a highly complex woman who only ever showed a brave and elegant face to the world. At last, thanks to Sonia Purnell’s excellent book, we see her true nature.
–Amanda Foreman, author of A World on Fire

“At last Sonia Purnell has given us the first political biography of Clementine Churchill, a woman of power and progressive vision. Although she was her husband's best guide and most astute advisor during the worst of times, her essential role is generally unacknowledged. Boldly written and illuminating, this is a generative restoration of a fascinating woman who transcended family grief and marital agonies to lead her husband and the nation with grace, commitment and persistence.”
–Blanche Wiesen Cook, author of Eleanor Roosevelt

“An acute and sympathetic biography which brings Clementine Churchill out of the shade into which her illustrious and domineering husband has cast her and shows how key she was to his success. Sonia Purnell makes us ask how Clementine endured life with Winston, and provides the answers.”
–Margaret MacMillan, author of Paris 1919 and The War that Ended Peace

"In this wonderful book Sonia Purnell has at long last given Clementine Churchill the biography she deserves. Sensitive yet clear-eyed, Clementine tells the fascinating story of a complex woman struggling to maintain her own identity while serving as the conscience and principal adviser to one of the most important

figures in history. Purnell succeeds brilliantly at an almost impossible task: providing fresh and thought-provoking insights into Winston Churchill in the course of examining his complicated marriage. I was enthralled all the way through."
–Lynn Olson, bestselling author of Citizens of London and Those Angry Days

"An excellent book…Both scrupulous and fair-minded, Sonia Purnell has done her subject proud in this eye-opening and engrossing account of the strong-willed and ambitious woman without whom Winston Churchill's political career would have been a washout."
–Miranda Seymour, The Telegraph

"It seems extraordinary that no one has given this remarkable woman proper biographical treatment before. . . . She sacrificed her children and her health in the greater service of her husband, but she also kept him buoyant. This book is a salutary reminder that the Churchills were always a team."
–The Times (UK)

"Compellingly readable. . . . Sonia Purnell's biography of Winston's wife Clementine brings her out from behind the shadow cast by the Great Man. She became her husband's wise counselor, discreetly offering sound advice, re-writing his speeches, toning down his foolish or angry letters, preventing him from making certain terrible political mistakes. . . . Her wheeling and dealing was done behind a veil of gracious femininity."
–The Independent (UK)

"Eye-opening. . . . A bold biography of a bold woman; at last Purnell has put Clementine Churchill at the center of her own extraordinary story, rather than in the shadow of her husband's."
–Mail on Sunday (UK)

"In our own era of sturdy individualism, it is remarkable to read of Clementine's resolve to subordinate her own desires and her children's happiness to her husband's cause. . . . An intriguing study of a character both deeply flawed and, in her way, magnificent."
–The Evening Standard (UK)

About the Author
Sonia Purnell is a biographer and journalist who has worked at The Economist, The Telegraph, and Sunday Times. Her first book, Just Boris, a candid portrait of London mayor and Brexit champion Boris Johnson, was longlisted for the Orwell prize. Clementine, published as First Lady:The Life and Wars of Clementine Churchill in the UK, was chosen as a Book of the Year by The Telegraph and Independent and was shortlisted for the Plutarch Award. Residence: London, UK Social: Twitter: SoniaPurnell

Introduction

Late in the evening of Monday, June 5, 1944, Clementine Churchill walked past the Royal Marine guards into the Downing Street Map Room wearing an elegant silk housecoat over her nightdress. Still fully made up, she looked immaculate and, as always, serene. Around her the atmosphere was palpably tense, even

frayed. She glanced at the team of grave-faced “plotters” busily tracking troops, trucks and ships on their charts. Then she cast her eyes over the long central table, whose phones never stopped ringing, to the far corner, where, as expected, she spotted her husband, shoulders hunched, face cast in agonized brooding. She went to him as she knew she must, for no one else—no aide, no general, no friend, however loyal—could help him now.

Clementine Churchill was one of a tiny group privy to the months of top secret preparations for the next morning’s monumental endeavor. Fully apprised of the risks involved in what would be the largest seaborne invasion in history, she knew the unthinkable price of failure: millions of people and a vast swath of Europe would remain under Nazi tyranny, their hopes of salvation dashed. She also knew the ghosts that haunted Winston that night, the thousands of men he had sent to their deaths in the Dardanelles campaign of the First World War. She alone had sustained him through that disaster and the horrors of his time serving in the trenches on the Western Front.

Churchill had delayed the D-day operation for as long as he could to ensure the greatest chance of success, but now British, American and Canadian troops would in a few hours attempt to take a heavily fortified coastline defended by men who were widely regarded as the world’s best soldiers. Huge convoys were already moving through the darkness toward their battle stations off the coast of Normandy. Earlier that evening, Winston and Clementine had discussed the prospects of the gambit’s success, at length and alone, over a candlelit dinner. No doubt he had poured out his fears and she had sought, as so many times before, to stiffen his resolve. In the end, the command to proceed had been given.

Looking up now as she approached, Winston turned to his wife and said, “Do you realise that by the time you wake up in the morning twenty thousand men may have been killed?”1

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To the outside world Winston Churchill showed neither doubt nor weakness. Since he had declared to the world in June 1940 that Britain would “never surrender,” his was the voice of defiance, strength and valor. Even Stalin, one of his fiercest critics, was to concede that he could think of no other instance in history when the future of the world had so depended on the courage of a single man.2 What enabled this extraordinary figure to stand up to Hitler when others all around him were crumbling? How did he find in himself the strength to command men to go to their certain deaths? How could an ailing heavy drinker and cigar smoker well into his sixties manage to carry such a burden for five long years, cementing an unlikely coalition of allies that not only saved Britain but ultimately defeated the Axis powers?

Churchill’s conviction, his doctor Lord Moran observed while tending him through the war, began “in his own bedroom.” This national savior and global legend was in some ways a man like any other. He was not an emotional island devoid of need, as so many historians have depicted him. His resolve drew on someone else’s. In fact, Winston’s upbringing and temperament made him almost vampiric in his hunger for the love and energy of others. Violet Asquith, who adored him all her life, noted that he was “armed to the teeth for life’s encounter” but “also strangely vulnerable” and in want of “protection.”3

Only one person was able and willing to provide that “protection” whatever the challenge, as she showed on that critical June night in 1944. Yet Clementine’s role as Winston’s wife, closest adviser and greatest influence was overlooked for much of her life, and has been largely forgotten in the decades since.

Neither mousy nor subservient, as many assume her to have been, Clementine Churchill was so much more than an extension of her husband. Like him, she relentlessly privileged the national interest above her health and family; her list of extramarital achievements would put many present-day government ministers, speechwriters, charity chiefs, ambassadors, activists, spin doctors, MPs and hospital managers to shame.

Unlike Winston, she was capable of great empathy, and she had a surer grasp of the importance of public image. In her trendsetting sense of style she was a precursor to Jackie Onassis—with her leopard-skin coats and colorful chiffon turbans—and her skills as a hostess played a crucial role in binding America to the cause of supporting Britain. For all this and more, she was honored by three British monarchs, and by the Soviet Union. Just surviving, let alone shaping, what must surely count as one of the twentieth century's most challenging marriages should surely be a notable triumph in itself.

Winston once claimed that after their wedding they had simply "lived happily ever after." That is stretching the truth. There was never a break from the "whirl of haste, excitement and perpetual crisis"4 that surrounded them. She could not even talk to him in the bathroom without on occasion finding members of the cabinet in there, half-hidden by the steam. Nor were their exchanges always gentle. They argued frequently, often epically, and it was not for nothing that he sometimes referred to her as "She-whose-commands-must-be-obeyed."5 An opinionated figure in her own right, she was unafraid to reprimand him for his "odious"6 behavior, or to oppose privately his more noxious political beliefs; gradually she altered his Victorian outlook with what he called her "pinko" ideas and her support for women's rights. But however furiously they might have disagreed, she loved him and reveled in her union with a man so "exciting" and "famous." For his part, he simply doted and depended on her.

Throughout the first three decades of their marriage, Winston and Clementine were united by a common project: making him prime minister. When that goal was achieved, their aim changed and became survival itself. In peacetime, despite her misgivings about his refusal to give up politics, they were jointly dedicated to his legacy. Not only did they weather repeated public and personal humiliation together, they overcame the bitterest of personal tragedies and survived the all-but-intolerable strains of being at the center of two world wars. In so doing they forged one of the most important partnerships in history. The question is not just what she did for him, but what could he have done without her?

Even so, this formidable woman has virtually no public presence in popular history. While Churchill is understandably one of the most analyzed figures of all time, the preternaturally private Clementine has remained overlooked and unexplained. She is so elusive that views differ on such basic questions as the color of her eyes (gray, blue or hazel-brown?7) and hair (ash-blond, brown or red?8). Many people think Winston's wife was the "American one," when in fact it was his mother, Jennie, who came from the US. Consult certain biographies of Winston Churchill and she features as barely more than a passing acquaintance. The index of Nigel Knight's Churchill: The Greatest Briton Unmasked, for instance, contains not one single reference to Clementine. Other biographers, such as Richard Hough, author of Winston and Clementine: The Triumph and Tragedies of the Churchills, go so far as to claim that she was a "nuisance" who added to rather than reduced the pressures on her husband.

It is certainly true that Clementine was sometimes rigid and unforgiving, but in these traditionally minded, one-sided accounts Winston's own testament to what she meant to him has been conveniently underplayed or misconstrued. So have the perspectives of the many generals, politicians, ambassadors, civil servants and assistants who worked closely with them both and became her fervent admirers. Even Lord Beaverbrook, the buccaneering newspaper magnate who was for a long time her most loathed personal enemy, became in the end a devoted fan. It is ironic and telling that many of these incidental observers are far better known than she.

Today we are fascinated by the deeds and dress of our contemporary First Ladies, on both sides of the Atlantic. In a different era Clementine largely, if not wholly, escaped such media scrutiny. She hardly courted the press on her own account—though she was a skillful operator on behalf of her chosen causes. Yet she was more powerful and in some ways more progressive than many of her modern successors. The struggles she endured still resonate—not least her grueling inner turmoil, which Winston found so difficult to

understand. It is high time for a fresh appraisal of the woman behind this great but erratic man, one that will allow her contribution to be duly recognized.

The only existing account of Clementine's life—an admirable book by the Churchills' daughter Mary Soames—was, although later revised, first published nearly forty years ago. It understandably treats its subject from the family's viewpoint, with conspicuous gaps in the story. Since then many revealing papers—such as the Pamela Harriman collections at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC—have been released or have come to light for the first time, and several former staff have opened up about their experiences. What fascinates over and over again is the strength of the impression Clementine made on so many people, including allies from Russia, Canada, Australia and America, as well as those who witnessed her in action closer to home. Some contemporaries recorded a "physical shock" on meeting her for the first time. Who would have guessed that she laughed louder than Winston? That she was taller than him and decidedly more athletic? That he cried more than she did and owned more hats? That the camera never quite captured her startling beauty and that she could, like a princess, lift a room merely by entering it? Or that she was not the paradigm of upper-class matronliness but the surprising product of a broken home, a suburban grammar school and a lascivious mother, and that one of her most formative years was spent in and around the fish market at Dieppe?

This is not a history of the war, or a study of Winston Churchill from an alternative vantage point, although oft-neglected aspects of his character do come to the fore. It is, instead, a portrait of a shy girl from a racy background who was related to Britain's most glamorous aristocratic family (in more ways than one) but was looked down upon by her own mother and disdained by the dominant political dynasty of her day. It is the story of someone who feared casinos and bailiffs, and struggled to bond with her children. It is an attempt to recover the memory of a woman who married a man variously described as "the largest human being of our times" and "the stuff of which tyrants are made." (That he never became one is in no small part thanks to her.) Even before 1940 Clementine's life was packed with drama, heartache and endurance. But, colorful and troubled as her life had been thus far, all of that was merely a lengthy and exhaustive apprenticeship for her critical role as First Lady during her country's "death fight" for survival.

Before Clementine Britain had known merely the "politician's wife": opinionated, perhaps, but rarely directly involved in government business. And today we have much the same: women glossed up for the cameras on set-piece occasions, thin, smiling and silent. Her immediate successors—Violet Attlee in 1945 and Clarissa Eden in 1955—were of markedly lesser ambition and failed to pick up her baton. Clarissa, Anthony Eden's wife, was glamorous, younger, more intellectual and arguably more modern than Clementine (her aunt by marriage), but she lacked a populist touch and admits she was never even briefed on government business, and lacked "the gumption to ask." She said: "I can't believe how passive and hopeless I was."9 Clementine's postwar successor, Violet Attlee, was "jealous" of the time taken up by her husband's job10 and Harold Wilson's wife, Mary, was at first so overawed at being the prime minister's spouse that she would be physically sick every morning.11 Cherie Blair, probably the prime ministerial consort most involved in her husband's role since Clementine, explained the universal predicament thus: "There is no job description for the Prime Minister's spouse because there is no job. But there is a unique position that provides for each holder an opportunity and a challenge."12 How interesting that a woman born into the Victorian age, who never went to university, had five children and could not vote until her thirties, should have grasped that opportunity and challenge with greater ambition and success than any of those who have come since.

The case can be made that no other president or prime minister's wife has played such a pivotal role in her husband's government. It was arguably greater than that of even the greatest of American First Ladies, Clementine's direct contemporary Eleanor Roosevelt. This appears all the more remarkable in light of how poorly defined and resourced the position at 10 Downing Street is in comparison with that of American First

Ladies. From the very earliest days of the Union the wife of the US president has enjoyed a status that, albeit not enshrined in the Constitution itself, provides an official platform for public work and influence, backed by the heavily staffed Office of the First Lady. Clementine had no official staff, role model or guidebook. She in effect invented her wartime role from scratch, and eventually persuaded an initially reluctant government to help her.

She never sought glory for her achievements and rarely received it. She was in fact genuinely astonished when noticed at all. Curiously, it was often visiting Americans who were most observant of the scale of her contribution during the war. The US ambassador Gil Winant was intensely moved when he accompanied her on a tour of bombed-out streets during the Blitz. As she talked to people left with little more than piles of rubble, he noticed the "great appreciation" she stirred in middle-aged women, who seemed inspired and uplifted by her presence. Marveling at the "deep" and "significant" looks of empathy that "flashed between her and these mothers of England," he was puzzled as to why the newspapers and indeed the British government made so little of what she did.13 Clementine's huge mailbag at the time was full of letters from people who were grateful for her help, people who viewed her as their champion. But while others, such as the queen, have been loudly and widely hailed for their war work, her part in the story seems to have been lost.

"If the future breeds historians of understanding," Winant wrote shortly after the return of peace, Clementine's "service to Great Britain" will finally be "given the full measure [it] deserves." This book attempts to do just that.

CHAPTER ONE

The Level of Events

1885–1908

Fear defined Clementine Hozier's earliest memory. Having been deposited by her nurse at the foot of her parents' bed, she saw her "lovely and gay" mother, Lady Blanche, stretch out her arms toward her. Clementine yearned for her mother's embrace yet she froze on the spot at the sight of her father slumbering at her mother's side. "I was frightened of him," she explained much later.1 By then the damage had been done. Clementine was never to gain a secure place in her mother's affections nor would she conquer her trepidation of the forbidding Colonel Henry Hozier, who, she came to believe, was not her father anyway. For all the fortitude she would show in adulthood, her instinctive insecurity never left her.

The Hoziers were living on Grosvenor Street, in central London, a far cry from the romantically haunted Cortachy Castle, in the Scottish Highlands, where Lady Blanche had grown up. Clementine's mother was the eldest daughter of the tenth Earl of Airlie, whose ancient Scottish lineage was enlivened by castle burnings and Jacobite uprisings. Her seraphic face belied her own rebellious spirit, and her parents, their family fortunes much reduced by the earl's gambling losses, had been keen to marry her off. They were thus relieved when in 1878, at the age of twenty-five, she became engaged to Colonel Hozier, even though he was fourteen years her senior and only come-lately gentry of limited means.

Lady Blanche's mother, also called Blanche, was a Stanley of Alderley, a tribe of assertive and erudite English matriarchs who combined radical Liberal views with upper-class condescension. They thought new clothes, fires in the bedroom and—above all—jam the epitome of excessive indulgence. Champions of female education, the Stanley women had cofounded Girton College in Cambridge in 1869. No less formidably clever than these eminent forebears, the elder Blanche had later mixed with the likes of the

novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, the Tory prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, his bitter Liberal rival William Gladstone, and John Ruskin, the art critic, designer and social thinker. She had made her ineffectual husband switch the family political allegiance from Conservative to Liberal and was equally forceful with her tearful granddaughter Clementine, who was not her favorite. It was evidently unfitting for a girl of Stanley blood to show her emotions.

Hozier's family made its money in brewing, gaining entrance to society thanks to the profits of industry rather than the privilege of birth. Although his elder brother became the first Lord Newlands and Henry himself received a knighthood in 1903 for his innovative work at Lloyd's of London after a distinguished career in the army, the Hoziers remained essentially nouveau: middle-class stock who earned their own living.

In the eyes of many in the City, Henry was a "flamboyant" personality, but the Lloyd's archives suggest a darker nature. He had graduated top of his class from Army Staff College and was decorated with the Iron Cross by Emperor Wilhelm I when serving as assistant military attaché to the Prussian forces during the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, and this and his service in Abyssinia and China appear to have gone to his head. His colleagues at Lloyd's thought he was a "born autocrat" with an "excessive love of power" and an absence of humor. He also apparently suffered from an "excessive" fondness for spending the corporation's money. An internal investigation in 1902 revealed that his business methods, while productive, were of "doubtful ethics." Some of his soi-disant successes were, in truth, exaggerated or unfounded, and after he challenged one persistent critic to a duel in 1906, his reputation inside the upper echelons of Lloyd's never quite recovered.2 Clementine was probably unaware of these stains on his character, admitting in a booklet she wrote for her own children, entitled "My Early Life," that she knew very little about her father's existence outside the home.

The earl considered his son-in-law a "bounder," and Lady Blanche soon discovered to her horror that her husband's previous career giving orders in the army had led him to expect the same unquestioning obedience at home. Far from liberating her from parental control, marriage to the splenetic and vengeful Henry proved even more restrictive. Before her wedding, Lady Blanche had assumed that she would become a notable political hostess in her own right. After leaving the military in 1874 Hozier had briefly dabbled in public life—standing unsuccessfully in 1885 as the Liberal Unionist candidate for Woolwich and helping to pioneer the idea of an intelligence service—but he had not the remotest interest in hosting his wife's freewheeling aristo friends. Nor did he want children. Lady Blanche decided that she would take the matter into her own hands if he refused to oblige her. It was not helpful that Hozier was frequently away on business and unfaithful himself. Sexy, bored and lonely, Lady Blanche saw no reason not to shop around for a worthy mate of her own.

Five years after her wedding day, on April 15, 1883, she gave birth to her first child, Kitty. Two years later, on April Fools' Day, Clementine (rhyming with mean, not mine) was born in haste on the drawing room floor. The twins—Nellie and William (Bill)—came three years later. It is now thought that none of the four children was Hozier's and that there may in fact have been more than one biological father. Although it was not unusual for upper-class couples in the late nineteenth century to take lovers, the custom was to wait until an heir had been born before playing the field. Discretion was also expected. Lady Blanche ignored all the rules to such an extent that there were rumors of altercations between rivals. Indeed, she is reputed to have juggled up to ten lovers at once—a feat of athletic organization that she was pleased to advertise quite widely.

Clementine had no knowledge of all this as a child, and the family has only in recent years publicly acknowledged the question marks over her paternity. Doubts were, however, well aired by others during her lifetime. Lady Blanche's own, albeit inconsistent, confessions to friends suggest that Clementine was in fact

a Mitford. Her handsome and generous brother-in-law, the first Baron Redesdale, Bertie Mitford, was certainly a favored amour. Photographs of Clementine and Bertie—particularly in profile—suggest remarkable similarities, not least their fine aquiline noses. Perhaps it was as a tribute to her sister's forbearance in sharing her husband in this way that Lady Blanche named her second daughter after her. Bertie's legitimate son David went on to father the six renowned Mitford sisters: the novelist Nancy, the Nazi supporters Unity and Diana (whose brother Tom shared their fascist sympathies), the Communist Decca and Debo, later Duchess of Devonshire, and Pamela, who largely escaped public scrutiny.

Besides Mitford, the other prime candidate is Bay Middleton, an avid theatergoer of great charm and private melancholy. He later broke his neck steeplechasing but was a frequent visitor to Lady Blanche during the years when she conceived her two eldest daughters. She dropped hints to notable gossips that he was the one, although some have since suggested that this was a fig leaf for her sister's sake. Such was the complexity of Lady Blanche's sex life that we shall probably never know the truth. Clementine's daughter Mary Soames found it "difficult to take a dogmatic view," saying, "Je n'y ai pas tenue la chandelle."3

The excitable younger Mitfords relished their great-aunt's racy reputation, but the rest of Lady Blanche's family thought her "mad." London's more respectable drawing rooms were similarly scandalized by the public uncertainty over the Hozier children's paternity, with the result that Lady Blanche was regularly snubbed. Meanwhile, her children were cared for by a succession of grumpy maids and governesses who vented their frustration by swishing their wards' bare legs with a cane. The one kindly soul in those early years was sixteen-year-old Mademoiselle Elise Aeschimann, a Swiss governess who arrived when Clementine was three. She thought the infant girl starved of attention and took to carrying her around everywhere, despite Lady Blanche's admonitions not to spoil her. Mademoiselle Aeschimann started Clementine and Kitty on their lessons, especially French, and though she stayed only two years her warmheartedness made a lasting impression. Clementine later went to visit her in Switzerland and even helped her financially when she fell on hard times in old age.

Clementine remained an anxious child, however, and was tormented by a perfectionist streak. According to her daughter Mary she had a "most sensitive conscience, and suffered untold miseries if the immaculate white of her lace-edged pinafore was marred by spot or stain."4 She took endless pains to form the neatest handwriting, a trait that led the adult Clementine to describe her younger self as a "detestable little prig."5 Her principal emotional crutch was a large black pet poodle called Carlo, which devotedly listened to her troubles until it was tragically killed under the wheels of a train. Clementine had been ordered to leave the dog behind at the family's new home, a country house outside Alyth in Scotland, but Carlo had pursued her to the station and tried to jump on board. "I do not remember getting over this," she told her children many years later.6 Such emotional neediness—and a continuing fear of adults—earned her much maternal scorn. Kitty, by contrast, was puckish, pretty, shared her mother's extroverted flamboyance and won Lady Blanche's effusive love. Unsurprisingly, she became accustomed to getting her way—even once threatening to burn down the house to stop a governess from reporting her latest misdeed. Lady Blanche's devoted preference for her firstborn was brazen and consistent.

In autumn 1891, Hozier sued for divorce and the two elder girls became "helpless hostages" in a bitter battle over custody and financial support. Clementine was just six when she and Kitty were wrested from their mother and sent to live with their father and his sister, the spinster Aunt Mary, who believed children benefited greatly from being whipped. Hozier found the girls an inconvenience, so he parceled them off to a governess in the Hertfordshire town of Berkhamsted. Rosa Stevenson advanced her charges little academically but both girls observed her fastidious housekeeping, including the two hours spent every day polishing the oil lamps: "They burnt as bright and clear as stars," Clementine remembered fondly.7 She also recalled the delicious sausages, "although the slices were too thin and too few."

Sadly, Aunt Mary considered Mrs. Stevenson too soft and uprooted the girls again, this time dispatching them to a “horrible, severe”8 boarding school in Edinburgh. The odor of yesterday’s haddock and the crumbs on the floor offended Clementine, and like her sister she felt desperately homesick.

Hozier finally relented and allowed Lady Blanche to extract her unhappy daughters and whisk them back to her rented house in Bayswater, a district then known among the smart set as the West London “wildlands.” Waiting for them there were the four-year-old twins Bill and Nellie, who, after a year apart from their elder siblings, no longer recognized them. Hozier came for tea on a couple of occasions but his awkward visits were not a success and soon stopped altogether. Once the divorce was finalized, almost all of his financial support dried up. Lady Blanche may have had her children back, but she was now dependent on her own cash-strapped family for handouts.

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Over the following eight years, Lady Blanche and her brood led a peripatetic existence, moving from one set of furnished lodgings to another. In part this was out of financial necessity, to keep one step ahead of her creditors, but the constant roaming also suited her capricious nature. She ensured every new home was elegant and fresh, with snowy white dimity furniture covers (always two sets so they could be kept spotlessly clean) and fine muslin curtains on the windows. Clementine was enraptured by her mother’s ability to spin comfort out of the least promising circumstances, writing in “My Early Life”: “She had very simple but distinguished taste and you could never mistake a house or room in which she had lived for anyone else’s in the world.” Lady Blanche’s exalted standards even inspired a new verb: to “hozier” became synonymous among her daughters’ friends with to “tidy away.” Unfortunately the cost of such stylish homemaking pushed the family ever further into debt.

In an effort to earn her keep, Lady Blanche, who was an excellent cook, wrote culinary articles for the newspapers, but she sometimes found herself too bored or distracted to put food on the table for her own offspring. She was frequently absent (presumably with one of her many lovers) but if her children sometimes wanted for maternal attention they rarely went short of instruction. Their mother employed full-time French- or German-speaking governesses and other teachers were brought in as required. The only, rigidly observed, omission from their education was arithmetic, which Lady Blanche deemed “unseemly” for girls.

Around 1898, when Clementine was thirteen, Lady Blanche decamped from London for rooms near the railway station at Seaford, just east of the English Channel port of Newhaven. There she lived with her dogs Fifinne and Gubbins on the first floor at 9 Pelham Place, a modest gray terrace house, while Clementine, Kitty, Nellie, Bill and their “feather-headed” governess stayed at number 11. Lady Blanche refused to muzzle her dogs, in contravention of strict new antirabies laws, and was once summoned to the magistrates’ court in Lewes. Although she emerged from the trial with the desired “not guilty” verdict, perhaps due to the fact that one member of the bench was a personal friend, Clementine was troubled by her mother’s being “not very law-abiding.”9

This rackety existence could not have been in starker contrast to the four weeks the children spent every summer with their grandmother in the historic splendor of Airlie Castle. Here Lady Blanche’s mother, the Dowager Countess of Airlie, kept an unblinking vigil against any hint of a lack of gratitude—a subject upon which she had written an essay—insisting on the need to instill this virtue in young children as “otherwise they grow up louts.”10 She believed in fasting to “awaken the gifts of the Spirit” and loathed unladylike pursuits. Lady Blanche allowed Kitty and Clementine to play croquet (a practice that would later prove extremely useful) but only behind the gardener’s cottage, out of Grannie’s sight. She may have had a fiery temperament but her natural rebelliousness provoked her to give her daughters what were then unusual freedoms. Not only did she hire bicycles for them back in Seaford (with their being too expensive to buy),

she allowed them to play bicycle polo on the rough grass opposite their lodgings too. Another beloved, unfeminine pastime was cricket, at which Clementine would in time become a decent player. She was also taught locally to play a creditable game of golf.

By now Clementine and Kitty were quite different: the former plain and awkward; the latter pretty and flirty—albeit impudent and ruthless as well. Clementine stood in her boisterous sister's shadow but never showed any jealousy. In fact she found Kitty a comfort in a bewildering world. The star relied on a devoted supporting act, and while this role was far from easy it was nonetheless one in which Clementine came to excel. Like Lady Blanche, she was "dazzled" by her sister. Kitty, meanwhile, shared her younger sibling's "unspoken contempt" for their mother's "violent, ungovernable partiality." "You mustn't mind it," she would counsel Clementine. "She can't help it."11

Clementine's plight won sympathy from at least one of Lady Blanche's friends—Mary Paget, a tenderhearted woman who often invited the girl to stay at her nearby home, West Wantley. Clementine adored the sixteenth-century manor with its ducks, chickens and boating lake, and envied the Pagets their stable family life. She considered Mary, who was her only real childhood friend, to be the most beautiful woman in the world. In truth, Mary was handsome but plump, and sometimes her stays would burst open while she was gardening. She pinned false gray hair into her rather sparse bun and it would habitually fall out among the flower beds.

Clementine's fondness for this generous woman made her return to Seaford all the more wrenching at the end of the golden weeks spent in her care. Many tears would be shed, and noticing Clementine's reddened eyes, Lady Blanche once angrily accused her of loving Mary Paget more than her. To which Clementine rashly replied: "Of course I do."12 The Wantley trips were stopped.

With no real home or father, scant money and precious little maternal love, it is perhaps unsurprising that on the cusp of her adolescence Clementine entered an emotionally religious phase. She yearned for respectability and certainty, and in November 1898, she was confirmed in Kirriemuir Church, near Lady Blanche's family seat, watched by her mother, grandmother and Mary Paget. Her piety became so fervent that on one occasion, after listening to a sermon on charity, she donated a pendant given to her by a relative, only to be admonished for giving away such a valuable gift and compelled to ask for its return.

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By the summer of 1899 Lady Blanche was deeply in debt. Hozier had failed to provide even the meager allowance he had agreed to following the divorce, but governesses still had to be paid, and then there were the annual fees for Bill's education at Summer Fields preparatory school in Oxford. Lady Blanche wanted him to benefit from the sort of schooling expected of the grandson of an earl, but her mother's help extended only so far, and lawyers instructed to pursue Hozier by her brother Lord Airlie had drawn a blank. Lady Blanche's financial straits had been worsened by illness. Over the spring months she had suffered from quinsy, a nasty complication of tonsillitis involving abscesses on the throat. In the age before antibiotics, it was a serious condition and she was laid low, finding it difficult to swallow. She was hardly in a fit state to up sticks once again, yet in the last week of July, out of the blue, the children were told they had just hours to pack all their possessions as the next morning they were moving to France.

Lady Blanche had long suspected that Hozier might try to snatch back Kitty and Clementine and it appears she suddenly had reason to suspect a strike was imminent. It was this fear that had motivated her curious decision to move to Seaford, as the town lay a mere five hours across the English Channel from their destination, Dieppe. Such was the haste of their departure that she had no time to plan what they would do once they reached France. Family lore has it that she chose where to go on arrival with the toss of a coin.

What we do know is that she hailed a cab for Puys and, upon spotting an attractive farm, La Ferme des Colombiers, along the way, ordered the driver to stop so that she might ask the owners if they had spare rooms. Luck was on her side and the family stayed there for the next two months, enjoying an idyllic summer of swimming and picnics. Clementine was living out of a suitcase once again.

In the autumn Lady Blanche moved her brood into town, renting a modest redbrick house at 49 rue du Faubourg de la Barre in Dieppe itself, where she hoped to enroll the girls in the school at the Convent of the Immaculate Conception. Already an adept French speaker, Clementine adjusted well to her new setting, but she was keenly aware of her outsider status. When the nuns and other girls sided against the British following the outbreak of the Second Boer War in October 1899, she and Kitty played truant in protest, idling away the morning forlornly on the beach. Nonetheless, she enjoyed her surroundings. Much of her time was spent outdoors, and she became more athletic and confident, displaying a competitive streak on the hockey field, where she broke her stick during a particularly fierce bout with an opposing center-forward.

Lady Blanche made the best of her exile. She relished Dieppe's bohemian lifestyle, which attracted foreign writers and artists such as Oscar Wilde, Max Beerbohm and Walter Sickert. She also enjoyed the casino, quickly becoming a regular. Needless to say, she lost money she did not have, and to Clementine's shame, the family was forced to ask for credit in the local shops. She was learning all too young to deal with public humiliation, and it was difficult not to blame her mother for their plight. Here was the source of a lifelong puritan streak; her fear of gambling never left her—indeed, it would later come to haunt her in the most horrific fashion.

Clementine's acute discomfort was not shared by her mother. Still beautiful at forty-seven, Lady Blanche continued to walk proud. The Dieppois were intrigued by this titled lady who ignored the fashions of the day, replacing the customary hat perched on a bun with a stylish mantilla and long plait down her back. Nor did Lady Blanche's daughters escape her cut-price interpretation of la mode—when Kitty, Clementine and their younger sister, Nellie, went shopping in the markets they did so clothed in cheap gingham dresses.

Clementine was embarrassed by these deviations from upper-class norms but whatever their attire, the girls' beauty was making an impact. While Kitty was more striking, with her long dark hair and deep blue eyes, the slender, tall and fairer Clementine was finally beginning to blossom. The painter Walter Sickert, a frequent visitor, flirted with the older girl but he took Clementine more seriously. He once invited her to tea alone at his lodgings where he lived with Madame Augustine Villain, his mistress, model and landlady, and the acknowledged queen of the Dieppe fish market. Madame Villain had several children who looked uncannily like Sickert, but he also seems, to Clementine's horror, to have been involved with Lady Blanche. "She remembered terrible rows between her mother, Mr. Sickert and the fishwife," recalls Shelagh Montague Browne, who later worked for Clementine. "It was a ménage. The fishwife would be throwing things in the market in a jealous temper. Clementine thought it all so unseemly."

For all Sickert's reputation at the time as a figure of, at best, questionable morals known for his paintings of explicit nudes, Lady Blanche allowed her fourteen-year-old daughter to go unchaperoned to his house. (Later in life Clementine herself developed a poor opinion of Sickert, once telling Cecil Beaton, "He was, without doubt, the most selfish human being I've ever come across,"13 and the crime writer Patricia Cornwell has recently suggested—though her thesis is much disputed—that he might even have been Jack the Ripper.) Following her mother's instructions, Clementine made her way up to Sickert's room. Finding him absent and the place a shambles, she followed her instincts and tidied up, throwing away the remains of a herring on the table. When Sickert returned, he angrily informed her that she had discarded the subject of his next painting. She was terrified at first but they soon sat down to chat over brioches and tepid cider. By the time she emerged, her intelligence and poise had won his admiration.

One snowy winter's night late in 1899, Lady Blanche's fears were confirmed. She was with Kitty, Clementine and Sickert in her sitting room, which looked directly out onto the street. The fire was lit but the curtains not yet drawn when Clementine noticed a strange male figure at the window. Before she could look again, her mother had grabbed her and Kitty and pushed them both onto the floor. The mysterious man stared and stared through the glass while they continued to lie prostrate out of sight. When he finally turned away, they heard the doorbell ring, but as Kitty rose to answer it her mother sharply pulled her back down. After an interminable wait, they heard the man walk away at last, and Lady Blanche revealed to the astonished girls that he was their father. She sent Kitty into the hall to see if he had left a letter.

Kitty returned with two, one for her, one for Clementine; they contained invitations from Hozier to dine and lunch with him in a private room at the Hôtel Royal on succeeding days. Clementine pleaded to be allowed not to go but her mother insisted they should; their trusty French maid Justine would accompany them to and from the hotel (although she would not be in attendance during the actual meals).

After Kitty's uneventful dinner, it was Clementine's turn for lunch. This time, Hozier tried to banish Justine from returning to collect her young mistress, insisting that he would escort his daughter home himself. Clementine directed an imploring look at her maid, begging her not to desert her, and during the meal of omelet and larks-en-brochette she was virtually speechless from anxiety. Hozier then delivered the dreaded news: she was to come to live with him, or rather with the whip-happy Aunt Mary.

Faced with this unthinkable prospect, Clementine exhibited a hitherto undetected determination and courage. While surreptitiously slipping on her gloves under the table, she announced calmly that her mother would refuse to allow her to leave Dieppe. The moment the faithful Justine returned for her, she rose from her chair and politely but firmly bade Hozier good-bye. In a fury, he suddenly barred her way, thrusting a gold coin into Justine's hand and pushing her violently out the door as he did so. Clementine was now trapped and alone with him once more, but when he moved to fetch a cigar, she valiantly seized her chance, flung the door open and ran full pelt toward Justine, who was waiting uncertainly outside. The two girls scrambled away as fast as they could on the icy pavements with Hozier, swearing angrily, in pursuit. Only once they neared the safety of the house did he finally give up and turn back.

The bank manager and the captain of the Dieppe–Newhaven steamer later confirmed that Hozier had been planning to kidnap Clementine and take her back to England that very afternoon. Her quick thinking had saved her. As her future husband would later put it, Lady Blanche's once timorous daughter had displayed an exceptional ability to "rise to the level of events."

Scarcely had one crisis passed before another came to test her. Just a few weeks later, in February 1900, Kitty contracted typhoid, probably from contaminated water. Clementine and Nellie were quickly sent away, making the long journey to relatives in Scotland alone. Fearing the effect on Kitty if she knew her sisters were leaving, Lady Blanche told them to say "good night" rather than "good-bye." The last they saw of Kitty, as they closed the door, was a silent and emaciated figure confined to bed.

With Bill already back at school in England, Lady Blanche was now free to pour all her energies into saving her sick child. She was helped by Sickert, who carried bucket after bucket of ice up to the girl's room in a bid to reduce her raging fever. But despite all her mother's efforts, Kitty died a month before her seventeenth birthday. Her body was taken back to England, where Lady Blanche pointedly chose to bury her beloved daughter at the Mitfords' home at Batsford rather than the family seat of Cortachy.

Clementine cut a lonely figure in the family now, for she was a young woman of nearly fifteen while the twins were three years younger and still children. Nor could her mother, who was never the same again, reach out to her. There was no enmity between them but their grief brought a further distancing. Clementine

was never to know the full, undivided warmth of a mother's love and now she had lost the elder sibling who had understood and appreciated her. She became protective of her little sister, Nellie, but Lady Blanche also soon transferred her attentions to her youngest daughter, leaving Clementine out in the cold once more.

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Their time in Dieppe was now over. Less than a year after leaving England, the family was uprooted yet again and returned to the picturesque suburban town of Berkhamsted, which offered cheap accommodation near a railway service to London and good inexpensive schools. They moved into an unpretentious Georgian terraced house on the high street, not far from where Clementine had stayed with Rosa Stevenson nine years earlier. She liked her new home, with its long narrow garden running up the hill at the back, and, despite the tragedy of losing Kitty, she was about to embark on what were probably the happiest and certainly the most settled years of her early life. Two months after her sister's death, Clementine started at the local grammar school, Berkhamsted School for Girls.

The experience was to change her outlook completely. Here she was fortunate to enjoy an education superior to that received by other aristocratic girls still tutored by governesses at home. A staff of clever, dedicated and often humorous female teachers quickly recognized her potential. Clementine was mixing with the largely friendly daughters of shopkeepers and doctors and both she and Nellie acclimatized quickly to all that provincial grammar school life entailed. Any awkwardness she might have felt in joining the school at fifteen, after her rackety aristocratic upbringing and with precious little formal schooling behind her, seems quickly to have dissipated. She had a particular fondness for her French teacher Mademoiselle Kroon, who would rouse daydreaming pupils with such lines as "Now, you fat bolster, wake up!" and she liked the company of her classmates. Indeed, she would seek them out again in later life, and would read the school magazine until her death. Seventy years after she left, Berkhamsted School was represented at her funeral.

On the family's return to England, Hozier asked to see Clementine once again. This time Lady Blanche accompanied her to his house in North Audley Street, London, but as she was taking leave of her daughter Hozier came to the door. He flew into a rage at the sight of his wife, leading to an ugly scene in the street and further mortification for Clementine. She had no way of knowing that this was the last time she would see this "strange, violent yet most compelling man."14 Despite her fear of her ostensible father, she later came to regret that Hozier, who died in Panama in 1907 at the age of sixty-nine, a year before her wedding, would never meet her future husband.

Back in the safe and studious atmosphere of Berkhamsted School, Clementine continued to thrive. Starting in what would now be tenth grade, she was quickly promoted to senior French. Lady Blanche's aversion to the teaching of sums, however, accounted for a humiliating demotion to a lower year for math. While Nellie was relaxed about her studies—preferring to devote her energies to captaining the girls' cricket team—Clementine was highly competitive. Nearly half a century later, when she returned to give a speech on the school's Commemoration Day in 1947, she spoke of the joy her education had brought her. "I loved it," she told the girls. "I felt I was out in the world, and on my own, away from the fiddling little tasks of arranging the flowers, folding the newspapers and plumping up the cushions."

Prizes came quickly. In 1901, she won a solid silver medal for French presented by the French ambassador, and even Lady Blanche now recognized her daughter's potential. The following year she treated Clementine to a trip to Paris with a former governess, Mademoiselle Louise Henri. Having been told to stay as long as they could on £25, they eked out this sum by barely eating. They visited museums, lectures and art galleries and Mademoiselle Henri gave Clementine thrilling glimpses of another world, pointing out famous music hall artistes in the street. Sickert, who turned up out of the blue one evening, also took her to meet the painter Camille Pissarro, who lived in a garret, and then to dinner in an elegant house where everything was

“exquisite”—the food, the furniture, the host’s manners. Clementine lapped up every minute; she now thirsted for worldly knowledge and experience.

Encouraged by her headmistress Beatrice Harris, whose embrace of feminine independence and suffragist views would have an enduring influence on Clementine, she was secretly nursing dreams of academia. University for women was still a comparative novelty, but Miss Harris (who later described her former pupil to Winston as “one of the high lights of the school” and “a worthy helpmeet”15) was so confident of Clementine’s chances that she offered to take her in over the holidays to continue her studies. This was going too far for Lady Blanche; she wanted her daughter to be well educated but not a bluestocking spinster. She rejected Miss Harris’s generous offer and set about sabotaging Clementine’s studious ambitions by diverting her into trivial traditionally feminine pursuits. Undeterred, Clementine crept up to the graveyard on the hill behind the house to study mathematics in secret, her books arranged across the flat tombstones. She was further spurred on in her studies by her great-aunt Maude Stanley, the sister of Lady Blanche’s mother, who also introduced her to the exciting world of politics. A kindly intellectual spinster in her late sixties who took a great interest in the welfare of women and the poor, Maude considered Clementine a kindred spirit.

In the tussle over Clementine’s future, however, Lady Blanche held the trump card. To stop this university nonsense once and for all she approached another relative, the wealthy Lady St. Helier, an aunt by marriage, and enlisted her help in launching Clementine into the world to which, by birth and upbringing, Lady Blanche deemed that she “properly” belonged. (Her own reputation and financial difficulties meant that she could do little to advance her daughter herself.)

Lady St. Helier—popularly known as Lady Santa Claus—loved to help the young. One of her beneficiaries, for whom she had pulled some strings in the British Army, was a certain Winston Churchill, the son of her American friend Lady Randolph Churchill, known to her closest friends as Jennie. Now here was a poor—and beautiful—female relation also in need of her support. Lady St. Helier invited Clementine to stay at her distinguished London mansion at 52 Portland Place, near Regent’s Park, and bought her a gown. She took her to lavish balls and glittering dinners, where, no longer eclipsed by Kitty, Clementine was fêted for her beauty. Sure enough, she was distracted from her schoolbooks and her head was turned. The possibility of leading an independent life at university and beyond had glimmered briefly but was now snuffed out forever.

By the time Clementine passed her Higher School Certificate in the summer of 1903, there was no more talk of academia. She left Berkhamsted and Miss Harris behind, albeit with happy and grateful memories. Lady Blanche had been so successful at dispensing with Clementine’s academic ambitions that she saw fit to reward her daughter by taking a house for them that winter in Paris, in the rue Oudinot in the seventh arrondissement. She even permitted Clementine to attend a few lectures at the Sorbonne. More to Lady Blanche’s taste, however, was the fashionable Voisin, a smart restaurant near the Palais Royal. Clementine loved the glamour but worried that such lavish spending was unwise. Lady Blanche explained that it was merely part of a civilized education, and in truth the grammar school pupil was feeling ever more at home in high society. In the spring of 1904, she was sent to stay for three months with the von Siemens family, the founders of the German electrical engineering company of the same name, in a beautiful house on the lake in Wannsee, a fashionable suburb of Berlin. Here she perfected her schoolgirl German, learned to ride and absorbed all that upper-class Berlin life could offer. A certain Continental polish merely inflated her reputation. On her return to London there were plenty of invitations and soon lots of suitors too, with Nellie jokingly keeping a “file” of proposals under “Discussed,” “Answered” and “Pending.”

Chief among the pending was the eligible Sidney Cornwallis Peel. The younger son of a viscount (and grandson of former prime minister Sir Robert Peel), he was constant, fifteen years her senior and rich. He took her to the theater and sent her white violets every day. Lady St. Helier thought her job was done. But

Clementine was a romantic, and she knew she was not in love. Despite all the pressure from her relatives to accept his hand, poor Sidney was simply not exciting; his letters veered from pleading to peevish and were generally, as he conceded himself, rather dull. He appears to have sensed that she was underwhelmed, writing in one of the few that have survived: “It was stupid of me to allow myself to be goaded into a black rage.”16 She broke off one engagement but was later secretly betrothed to him for a second time.

Then, in April 1906, she found her nerve again—at her cousin Sylvia Stanley’s wedding. Sylvia was in pain from a broken arm but insisted that the ceremony go ahead. Her passionate determination to marry the man she loved contrasted sharply with Clementine’s own tepid feelings and she parted from Sidney for the last time.

Afterward she seems to have panicked; after all, she needed to escape from her mercurial mother and what she would later confess to have been a “very difficult childhood.”17 Within weeks she was engaged again, this time to Lionel Earle, a wealthy civil servant with intellectual tastes. He was twice her age, and she had known him for barely a month. When he joined her for a fortnight’s holiday in the Netherlands, she saw him for the pompous bore he really was. Distraught, she broke off yet another engagement and had to return early wedding presents. The resulting emotional stress led to two months in bed.

Now that Nellie had also finished school, Lady Blanche gave up the lease on the house in Berkhamsted and moved to London to take a firmer hand in her daughters’ social careers. It is not clear how she financed the rent, but Lady Blanche first opted for 20 Upper Phillimore Place, in Kensington, where Clementine had no choice but to earn her keep, supplementing her small allowance by giving French lessons at a half crown an hour. A year later Lady Blanche moved again, this time more permanently, to a cream-painted stucco house nearby at 51 Abingdon Villas (not then a modish address). Here Clementine also began working for her cousin Lena Whyte’s dressmaking business. Needlework bored her, but she learned to make clothes and even hats—for herself as well as for clients. Later she compared these years to the struggles of Scarlett O’Hara, the heroine of Gone with the Wind, who keeps up appearances by making her gowns from old curtains.18

It was a very different existence from the idle luxury in grand houses enjoyed by her Stanley cousins Sylvia and Venetia, or the aristocratic circles in which her mother wanted her to move. Her clothes, for all Lady St. Helier’s generosity and her own needle and thread, made her feel like an outsider. So too did her inability to return hospitality. She was all too aware of the sniggers about her lack of fortune and knew that the less charitable found a snobbish glee in calling her “the Hozier.” She was also considered cold; but while certainly reserved, she was in the main trying to protect herself in a world that was both cliquey and savage. “Nobody knew who I was, so I felt terribly out of place,” she recalled to one of her assistants later in life. “I hated it.”19

Dressing in this era of upper-class Edwardian leisure was time-consuming and expensive, a process that involved high-maintenance coiffures, hats and numerous outfits. Just one “Saturday to Monday” country house weekend required several large trunks of different clothes, as outfits were changed four times a day. For her peers, there were servants who washed, starched, ironed, stitched, fetched and brushed and pinned up hair, whereas Clementine performed most of these chores herself. It is little surprise that as soon as she could afford one in later life she insisted on hiring a lady’s maid, and kept one long after the role had largely gone out of fashion.

Lack of an adequate wardrobe meant that some invitations had to be refused, but Clementine had inherited her mother’s genius for making the simplest outfits elegant. She was usually able to hold her own for an evening at least. Several contemporary accounts pour praise on her beauty. The diarist Lady Cynthia Asquith wrote that she should have been a queen, describing her as “classical, statuesque, yet full of animation . . . her superbly sculpted features would have looked so splendid on a coin.”20 The society magazine the

Bystander described Clementine in a 1908 issue as having “most delicately aquiline features, fine grey eyes, and a delightful poise of the head” with “the grace and distinction and soft strength of early Grecian art: she is divinely tall.” Sir Alan Lascelles, the future royal secretary and most pernickety of aesthetes, told Clementine’s daughter Mary that he would never forget his first glimpse of her mother in the Christmas holidays of 1903, when he was a sixteen-year-old schoolboy and she just two years older. Upon her announcement by the butler, the doors were thrown open to a large gathering, and in walked “a vision so radiant that even now, after sixty-one years, my always moving, always fastidious, eye has never seen another vision to beat it.”

The “beautiful Miss Hozier” was gratifyingly admired but Lady Blanche remained Clementine’s harshest critic. For all her own wanton pleasure-seeking, she insisted her daughter return from balls by the impossibly early hour of midnight. When Clementine inevitably arrived home late, her mother would reprimand her in full view on her doorstep. On one occasion, Lady Blanche even boxed her ears, an assault so traumatic that Clementine ran without hat or coat the three miles to Mary Paget’s house in Harley Street. The sympathetic Mrs. Paget went to reason with Lady Blanche before Clementine would agree to return home.

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A year after finishing school, during the summer season of 1904, Clementine attended a ball given by Lord and Lady Crewe at their home in Curzon Street. Among the guests in this Liberal household was Winston Churchill, now a rising young politician. Already a controversial figure, he was barred from most Conservative homes because earlier in the year he had defected from the party to join the Liberals over his opposition to tariff reform. (Winston was committed to the principle of free trade on the basis that it would keep food prices low, while the Conservative government was seeking to protect British industry with import duties.) Considered a renegade and class traitor by the Tories, he was viewed as pushy and puffed up even by admirers. His notorious adventures during the Second Boer War (the conflict doughtily defended by Clementine against her French classmates in Dieppe) and the insalubrious way in which his famous father, Lord Randolph, had died (reputedly from syphilis) lent him an air of raffish danger. A prolific author as well as a soldier and MP, he was already a celebrity.

Upon arriving at the ball, accompanied by his American mother, the voluptuous Jennie, Winston was arrested by the sight of a fawnlike girl alone in a doorway. He stood motionless, staring at her. He asked who she was and it transpired there were many connections between them: Jennie’s brother-in-law, Sir Jack Leslie, was the girl’s godfather and some years earlier Jennie herself had been a great friend of her mother. So Lady Randolph—whose supposed collection of two hundred lovers over her lifetime outnumbered even Lady Blanche’s—introduced Winston to Clementine. The great wordsmith was struck dumb, not even managing the customary invitation to dance. Clementine assumed she had been introduced out of pity, and in any case did not care for what she had heard about this notorious publicity-seeker. He was, to boot, shorter than her and with his pale round face was not exactly handsome. Clementine signaled to a male friend, Charles Hoare, for rescue. He swept her away onto the dance floor, where he asked what she had been doing talking to “that frightful fellow Churchill.”

It was an encounter that left no lasting impression on either of them. Winston had a habit of clamming up when first meeting beautiful women, as he had no capacity for small talk. He was also chauvinistically judgmental: he and his private secretary Eddie Marsh would habitually rank a woman on whether her face could launch “a thousand ships,” merely two hundred, or perhaps just “a covered sampan, or small gunboat at most.”21 Of course only an armada would do for him, so he had spent years chasing the “thousand ships” Pamela Plowden, daughter of the Resident of Hyderabad, Sir Trevor Chichele-Plowden. “Marry me,” he had once declared, “and I will conquer the world and lay it at your feet.”22 At other times, though, he was capable of “forgetting” to see or even write to her for months on end, and she detected something tellingly

unphysical in his manner. In any case, his future was uncertain and his finances even more so, and Pamela Plowden was not a woman to gamble with her own comfort. Nor could she remain constant; after rejecting Winston's proposal in 1900 she married the less demanding Earl of Lytton and proceeded to take numerous lovers.

Winston, unlike so many other powerful men then or since, was not tremendously fired up by sex. For him, like the hero in his semiautobiographical novel Savrola, "ambition was the motive force and he was powerless to resist it."23 Pamela rightly understood that any wife would always take second place to his career and that, although viewing their beauty with semireligious awe, he could be brusquely dismissive of women's conversation. His belittling of Lucile, the heroine in his novel, with the line "Woman-like she asked three questions at once"24 is indicative of his general attitude.

Winston felt he ought to have a wife, however. In the running around 1906 was shipping heiress Muriel Wilson, another willowy beauty with expensive tastes. Once again the sexual spark was missing, and in any case she found politics boring and could not envisage sacrificing her life of pampered luxury to the inconveniences of public duty. Her firm rejection was humiliating.

Before that he had flirted with the American actress Ethel Barrymore, who had caused a sensation in London when, in 1902, she arrived in a low-cut bodice pinned with flowers. Winston took her to the Churchills' family seat, Blenheim Palace, and upon her return to America he bombarded her with political news from Britain. He proposed to her two years later but her lack of interest was made all too clear when she inadvertently praised one of his greatest parliamentary foes.

Earlier still he had visited the West End music halls, once launching a rousing tribute to the dancers at the Empire Promenade, who were then under attack from antivice campaigners. "In these somewhat unvirginal surroundings," he recalled later, "I made my maiden speech." The nature of his interest in the dancers is debatable. On one occasion he went home with a Gaiety girl, who when asked the next morning how it had gone, replied that Winston had done nothing but talk into the small hours "on the subject of himself."25 So, as he approached his midthirties, he was still to marry or, as the newspapers liked to point out, grow a mustache or hairs on his chest. The press began to label him with that undesirable tag "confirmed bachelor."26

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One evening in March 1908, Clementine returned home tired after a day of teaching French to find a message from Lady St. Helier asking her to make up the numbers at a dinner the same evening. Clementine was reluctant: she had no suitable gown and was out of the requisite clean white gloves. But, under pressure from Lady Blanche, she eventually picked out a simple white satin princess dress and did her duty for her benefactress.

At 12 Bruton Street, Mayfair, Winston's faithful private secretary Eddie Marsh found him lingering in his bath. He was grumpy about the prospect of a dinner party that he fully expected to be a "bore." Marsh tactfully reminded him of Lady St. Helier's many kindnesses, and after more fuss eventually his boss rose from the bathwater to dress.

Clementine was already starting on the chicken course with the other guests by the time Winston arrived. Ruth Lee, the wealthy American who, with her British husband, Arthur, later donated their country house Chequers to the nation, wrote in her diary that Winston had taken the "vacant place on his hostess's left. He paid no attention to her, however, as he became suddenly and entirely absorbed in Miss Clementine Hozier, who sat on his other side, and paid her such marked and exclusive attention the whole evening that everyone was talking about it."27

Winston's fascination was piqued by one of the very necessities that, in Clementine's eyes, made her an outsider: never before had he met a fashionable young woman at a society dinner who earned her own living. Not only was this in itself to his mind worthy of respect but she was also ethereally lovely—another admirer had compared her to a "sweet almond-eyed gazelle." At twenty-two, she knew far more about life than the ladies of cosseting privilege he normally met, and she was well educated, sharing his love of France and its culture.

Through the influence of her aunts and her schooling, here was a woman who was actually interested in politics, if still unversed in its cut and thrust. She was receptive to new ideas, especially, it seemed, from him. For her, his gauche behavior at the ball four years previously had seemingly given way to a maturity and eagerness to please. She found his idealism and brilliance liberating.

After the ladies had left the table, Winston seemed exceptionally keen to finish his cigar and join them. He strode straight over to Clementine and monopolized her so obviously for the rest of the evening that the other women teased her when she finally left to fetch her coat. Years later, when asked whether she had found Winston handsome at that first meeting, she replied tactfully: "I thought he was very interesting."28 His one false move was an unfulfilled promise to send her a copy of his biography of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill: the omission "made a bad impression on me," noted Clementine later.

Thereafter he wasted little time. Within a couple of weeks he had invited Clementine and Lady Blanche to his mother's house, Salisbury Hall, near St. Albans, in Hertfordshire. There, Clementine had an early taste of political life when his promotion to the cabinet as president of the Board of Trade (at the precocious age of thirty-three) was announced during her stay. No doubt the excitement of being at the center of national events lingered in her thoughts as she embarked, soon after, on a long-standing trip to pick up Nellie from a tuberculosis clinic in the Black Forest and visit her grandmother in Florence.

Winston's first letter to her, on April 16, demonstrates a dramatic change in tone from his gushing notes to women such as Pamela. He wrote about how much he had enjoyed their discussions at Salisbury Hall, paying particular tribute to her cleverness. Here at last was a woman he could talk to rather than worship. "What a comfort & pleasure it was to me to meet a girl with so much intellectual quality & such strong reserves of noble sentiment," he wrote, adding that he hoped they would lay the foundations of a "frank & clear-eyed friendship" with "many serious feelings of respect."29 Clementine fired off an equally telling letter to Jennie: "You were so kind to me that you make me feel as if I had known you always. I feel no-one can know him . . . without being dominated by his charm and brilliancy."

In those days it was customary for MPs elevated to the cabinet to stand for reelection. So while Clementine was in Germany, Winston began campaigning in his largely working-class seat in northwest Manchester. In one letter to her, he referred in glowing terms to the help given to him on the stump by the famously good-looking Lady Dorothy Howard. Why he thought it fitting to praise this other woman for fighting on his behalf in every slum, crowd and street "like Joan of Arc before Orleans" can only be imagined. As can Clementine's reaction to his observation that Dorothy was "a wonderful woman—tireless, fearless, convinced, inflexible—yet preserving all her womanliness." On April 23 she replied: "I feel so envious of Dorothy Howard—It must be very exciting to feel one has the power of influencing people . . . I feel as much excited as if I were a candidate."30

This expression of political interest—with its hint of jealous concern—must have greatly pleased Winston, who may have been testing Clementine for her reaction. In a quick crossfire of correspondence, on April 27 he added: "How I should have liked you to have been there. You would have enjoyed it I think." He exhibited, moreover, a new mood of measured self-revelation, not least when he wrote: "Write to me again. I am a solitary creature in the midst of crowds. Be kind to me." Here at last the rumbustious adventurer of

popular folklore felt safe enough to admit that he was lonely. Indeed, in all the seventeen hundred letters and notes that Winston and Clementine would send to each other over the next fifty-seven years, isolation among people would prove the most persistent theme.

To the woman who had since Kitty's death felt unneeded, this was a clear signal that she might at last have found a new role to play. And despite his praise for Dorothy Howard, there was no reason for Clementine to regard her as a threat. Howard was too didactic on both women's suffrage and teetotalism—neither cause dear to Winston's heart—and he later referred to her as a "tyrant," if also "a dear." But he was at the same time something of a tease and liked to provoke Clementine to jealousy.

Her commitment was also tried when, for all Howard's efforts, on April 23 Winston lost the Manchester election. Now Clementine could see for herself the violent reactions he sometimes aroused. The Daily Telegraph, which had never forgiven him for abandoning the Tories for the Liberal Party, reported: "We have all been yearning for this to happen . . . Winston Churchill is out, Out, OUT." She could not help but admire, however, the way he picked himself up from this defeat before winning another election in Dundee the following month. She was now avidly reading the newspapers to monitor his every move.

Unusually self-sufficient, Clementine did not tell even close friends about her feelings, but she was convinced that she was in love. She saw Winston again several times in June and July but never alone. At times she would refuse his invitations, simply to avoid gossip, although she did agree to meet him at Salisbury Hall again in August. In the meantime, she was horrified to discover that a serious fire had broken out at a house where she knew him to be staying. Relieved to read in the Times that no one had been injured, she rushed to the post office to wire her joy to him.

Winston took this as a sign and persuaded his cousin Sunny, the Duke of Marlborough, to invite her to Blenheim. She demurred—not least because she was down to her very last clean dress. But Winston was insistent, promising that his mother and Sunny would look after her. "[Sunny] is quite different from me, understanding women thoroughly, getting into touch with them at once," he wrote rather naively. "Whereas I am stupid and clumsy in that relation . . . Yet by such vy different paths we both arrive at loneliness!"31

Clementine could refuse no longer. On August 10 she left the Isle of Wight, where she had been staying, and took the train to Blenheim. As she traveled through the English countryside, she wrote in shaky handwriting to Lady Blanche back in London: "I feel dreadfully shy & rather tired . . . I . . . can do nothing more intelligent than count the telegraph posts as they flash by." Soon afterward she was walking up the front steps into the gloom of Blenheim's great hall. There to greet her, below the muscular victory arch, were Winston; Jennie; the Duke; Winston's great friend F. E. Smith and his wife, Margaret; plus a private secretary from the Board of Trade. It was clear this was to be no low-key visit.

Alone in her high-ceilinged bedroom, she found a fire in the grate despite the August heat—an extravagance that no doubt offended her frugal nature. She looked in dismay at the bathtub, the hot and cold water jugs, the towels and sponges, knowing she had no way of dressing to the standards that her hosts would expect. Her spirits were lifted only when there was a knock at the door; noticing her unusual lack of a lady's maid, Jennie had discreetly sent her own. Yet despite this act of kindness, Clementine failed to sparkle at dinner, feeling impossibly shy in that cavernous Blenheim saloon with its forbidding military frescoes. Winston talked so much that perhaps he never noticed. He did, however, promise to show her the famous rose gardens overlooking the lake the following morning.

Punctual as ever, Clementine descended to breakfast at the appointed hour only to be left waiting and waiting. Fearing that she would flounce out at any moment, Sunny hastily invited her for a drive around the estate while he sent word of the emerging crisis up to Winston—who was still slumbering in his bed. The

walk was hastily rearranged for the afternoon, when finally Winston escorted Clementine to the gardens. They strolled down the hill, following the twists and turns in the path through the cedars and oaks planted for suspense and drama by the great landscape architect Capability Brown. They toured the rose garden, only some of its flowers drooping from the heat, and admired the glimpses of the great lake through the leaves. Yet by the time they began to make their way back up to the house, still nothing of much import had been said.

Finally, a summer shower drove the couple to take shelter in a little Greek temple folly, but there was by now a certain tension between them. Clementine spotted a spider scuttling across the floor, and with steely determination quietly decided that if Winston had not declared himself before it reached a crack in the flagstones she would leave regardless.32 Happily, just in time, Winston asked at last if she would marry him. Without any further unnecessary hesitation she agreed, on condition that he promise to keep their betrothal secret until she had asked for her mother's consent. But as they were leaving the temple, a seemingly intensely relieved Winston spotted Sunny and could not help himself, shouting: "We're getting married! We're getting married!" Despite this minor betrayal, she later sent him a note via the footman: "My dearest One, I love you with all my heart and trust you absolutely."33

The next day Clementine left Blenheim with a letter from Winston to her mother, asking for Lady Blanche's permission to marry her daughter and promising to give his prospective bride a "station" in life worthy of "her beauty and virtues." He could not bear to wait for the answer, though, and at the last moment jumped on the London-bound train beside her.

Lady Blanche considered Winston just right for her unusual offspring. He did not have the fortune she would have liked, but he was brilliant and ambitious and could earn his own living—and at least he was marrying for romance rather than money. In an approving letter to her sister-in-law, she said: "I do not know which of the two is the more in love."34 Soon afterward Winston wrote to Clementine, "[There are] no words to convey to you the feelings of love & joy by wh my being is possessed. May God who has given to me so much more than I ever knew how to ask keep you safe & sound."35 Clementine responded gleefully: "I feel there is no room for anyone but you in my heart—you fill every corner."36

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News of the engagement drew mixed reactions. In Dieppe, Madame Villain ran through the streets crying out the news in delight. The chattering classes in London took a more negative view of the marriage's prospects, deciding that Clementine would either be crushed or prove insufficiently malleable. Her grandmother predicted that the woman she'd known as such a fearful child would obediently "follow" Winston and "say little."37 Lord Rosebery, the former prime minister, forecast the pair would last six months, because Winston was "not the marrying kind."38

Clementine told people that she was under no illusions that being married to Winston Churchill would be easy but she did think it "would be tremendously stimulating." She was also excited about her ring—"a fat ruby with two diamonds," she boasted to Nellie. But somehow, now that she was engaged she was more reticent with him, writing: "Je t'aime passionément—I feel less shy in French." It appears her reserve worried Winston; he wrote to F. E. Smith: "Is it fair to ask this lovely creature to marry so ambitious a man as myself?"39

Even so, he would not brook a long engagement. A date was fixed for the wedding at St. Margaret's, Westminster, for a month's time. Clementine wanted everything to be perfect, but as the days flew by with so much to be done she felt herself sinking. The newspapers were now following her every step. She was young, beautiful and marrying a celebrity; she was news, with all the personal invasion that entails.

Photographs of her face were everywhere. The Daily Mail took a particular interest in a dress fitting that lasted, by its calculations, six hours. By contrast, Winston—tied up with his politics as ever—was rarely to be seen. There were moments when she began to falter, but her brother, Bill, steadied her. He reminded her that she had already broken off at least two engagements and that she could not humiliate a public figure like Winston Churchill.

There was a reason other than nerves for her wobble. Shortly after their engagement, Winston had embarked on an eleven-hundred-mile round trip to a Scottish castle on a rocky promontory north of Aberdeen, where another beautiful young woman was waiting for him. Over the past year he had become close friends with Violet, the slender-waisted twenty-one-year-old daughter of his relatively new boss, the Liberal prime minister Herbert Henry Asquith. Although spoiled and immersed in a life of almost royal luxury, Violet had a brilliant mind—in her stepmother Margot's view "alas too brilliant"—and found most men her age dull. She held Winston, however, in the "high esteem he held himself." In fact, they were remarkably alike—opinionated, garrulous, idealistic, willful and pugnacious. Both, moreover, loved and lived politics. She met him at balls and dinners, or when he came to visit her father; soon she was clearing her diary to see him all the more. Later Violet would insist they had always been just friends, but all the signs are that she was deeply in love. She declared herself "inebriated" by the way he talked and "enthralled" by his genius. Unfortunately, Winston was not in search of a female version of himself.

Upon learning of the engagement on August 14, Violet had reputedly fainted and then written a venomous letter to Clementine's cousin Venetia Stanley, who was to be a bridesmaid at the wedding. Winston's new fiancée, said Violet, was as "stupid as an owl," no more than "ornamental," and incapable of being "the critical reformatory wife" Winston badly needed in his career to "hold him back from blunders." Venetia replied by noting that the Manchester Guardian had (generously) included in a list of Clementine's accomplishments six languages, music and brilliant conversation, adding, "I think he must be a good deal in love with her to face such a mother in law."40 Even so, Violet's stepmother, Margot, remained convinced that Clementine had no brains, character or strength and was in fact "mad," whereas Violet's patronizing view was that she was "sane to the point of dreariness." Asquith himself predicted merely that the match would be a "disaster."

Clementine later admitted to finding such a reception as Winston's new fiancée "petrifying" and had instinctively opposed his decision to go ahead with his long-planned visit to Violet's holiday retreat—where Miss Asquith was caustically remarking that at least the engagement would provide "the Hozier" with a rest "from making her own clothes." Winston fatefully concluded it was still his duty to make his peace with the other woman who loved him, and once there, he and Violet went for romantic cliff-top hikes—but their time together soured when she slipped and cut her face, leaving her miserable and, in her own words, looking "worse than the vampire in Jane Eyre."41 By the time he left a few days later, she was almost hysterical.

Although the Asquiths were invited to the wedding, they did not come. Not that Violet had done with Winston; far from it. But Clementine would soon discover that she had more than one rival on her hands for his attentions.

CHAPTER TWO

More Than Meets the Eye

1908–14

Waking up at dawn on her wedding day in a large, chilly room at Lady St. Helier's mansion did nothing to

boost Clementine's spirits. Exiled by her mother from her own home to make room for guests, she was cut off in Portland Place from the bustle of family life. She longed to return, even if only for breakfast, for one last taste of the familiar before taking the leap into the unknown as Mrs. Winston Churchill.

Alas, a maid had taken away her day clothes, leaving her nothing to wear but her wedding dress. Feeling trapped, Clementine crept down the majestic staircase in her dressing gown while the house was still in shuttered darkness and Lady St. Helier asleep. The only soul about was a young under-housemaid blacking the grate in the morning room. Seeing a friendly girl of similar age, if not prospects, Clementine unburdened herself of her troubles. The good-hearted servant quickly abandoned her work to scurry upstairs to her attic.

Minutes later, a figure slipped out of a back door in the classic uniform of an off-duty maid. Wearing a dark, close-fitting cheap coat over a pretty print dress and black-buttoned boots, she hopped on a bus west to Kensington. A conductor, recognizing his famous passenger from the newspapers, suggested Clementine must have made a mistake. London was abuzz with the excitement of an aristocratic beauty marrying a global celebrity. Crowds of the scale normally seen only at a royal wedding were already beginning to take up their positions on the streets. But now here was the bride riding a bus away from where the ceremony was due to take place.

Nothing would deter her from returning to Abingdon Villas, however, and she arrived to astonished gasps, not only at her presence but also her unexpected attire. A merry time with Nellie and Bill restored her resolve and she soon headed back (by horse-drawn brougham this time) to prepare for the two p.m. service at St. Margaret's in Parliament Square.

It was September 12, 1908, and many grandees were still away on holiday, including half the cabinet, who had sent their regrets. Among the thirteen hundred guests who did turn up to Parliament's parish church were David Lloyd George, the Liberal chancellor of the Exchequer; F. E. Smith, one of the few Tories who had forgiven Winston's defection to the Liberals; and General Sir Ian Hamilton from his army days.

A number of places on the bride's side—it was anyone's guess exactly how many—were occupied by her mother's former admirers. Some were mischievously placed together, such as the gossipy poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and the Scottish peer Hugo Charteris, but significantly it was Bertie Mitford who sat in the front row beside Lady Blanche, who was resplendent in a purple silk gown trimmed with white fur. On the groom's side of course was Winston's mother, Jennie, competitively dolled up in beaver-colored satin and a hat decorated with dahlias. A fading beauty of fifty-four, she was now married to a man a mere fortnight older than Winston by the name of George Cornwallis-West.

The bells of Big Ben struck two o'clock, and four minutes later Clementine entered the fifteenth-century white-stone church on the arm of her handsome brother, Bill, now an officer in the Royal Navy. She walked down the aisle framed by rows of soaring white Gothic arches, bathed in the autumn sun streaming through the windows. Draped in shimmering white satin, a veil of tulle clipped to her hair by a coronet of fresh orange blossom, she wore diamond earrings from Winston and clutched a bouquet of fragrant white tuberoses and a white parchment prayer book. Behind Clementine were five bridesmaids—Nellie, cousins Venetia Stanley and Madeline Whyte, Winston's cousin Clare Frewen and a friend, Horatia Seymour. All wore amber-colored satin gowns and carried bunches of pink roses. More roses and camellias tumbled across their large black satin hats.

The choir sang "Lead us, Heavenly Father" while members of the congregation climbed on their seats for a better look. Many thought Winston fell short as the dashing groom in the presence of such elegance, and flanked by his dapper best man, the mustached Lord Hugh Cecil. He was losing hair and gaining weight, his face "settling into the attitude of pugnacity it was to become famous for."1 Tailor and Cutter magazine

branded his morning suit “one of the greatest failures as a wedding garment we have ever seen,” claiming that it lent him the appearance of a “glorified coachman.” When Clementine reached this unprepossessing figure before the altar, he somewhat bizarrely held out his hand and warmly shook hers.

Dean Welldon, who had been Winston’s headmaster at Harrow, proceeded to sum up what was now expected of the bride. A statesman, he declared, should be able to depend “upon the love, the insight, the penetrating sympathy and devotion of his wife.” Her role, and the influence she would exercise in her husband’s future public life, was so important as to be “sacred.” Winston’s vows after this portentous address were loud and clear, hers so soft as to be barely audible. The whole ceremony was a rehearsal for her future; when signing the register, Winston deserted her for an animated political discussion with Lloyd George.

When the married couple finally emerged from the church, mounted policemen held back the cheering throngs along the route to the reception back at Portland Place. There, guests were treated to a display of the wedding gifts: twenty-five silver candelabra and a large collection of wine coasters, pepper pots and silver inkstands paraded alongside a gold-topped walking stick sent by King Edward VII, and £500 in cash from the fatherly figure of German-born financier Sir Ernest Cassel. Clementine’s aunt Maisie had given her a chain set with “myriads” of sapphires, opals, amethysts and topazes, Winston’s aunt Cornelia a diamond necklace. Alongside these treasures were a fresh turbot with a lemon stuffed in its mouth—a gift from Madame Villain of Dieppe—and a manual entitled House Books on 12/- a Week.

The crowds had been won over by Clementine’s grace and beauty, and so had the press. In one of the next day’s papers a cartoon of a grinning Winston holding a stocking appeared over the caption: “Winston’s latest Line—Hoziery.” “Undoubtedly,” proclaimed the Times, the event had “captured the public imagination.” The Daily Mirror hailed it as “the Wedding of the Year.”

They spent their first evening as husband and wife at Blenheim—the palace having been tactfully vacated by Sunny, the duke. It can only be guessed who was the more nervous. Both were almost certainly virgins and at nearly thirty-four, Winston’s manly pride was at stake. He had been worried enough beforehand to seek advice from an expert—his mother. By the time they left Blenheim a couple of days later for Baveno on Italy’s Lake Maggiore, it appears the young couple had got the hang of things. On September 20, Winston was able to report to Jennie that they had “loitered & loved,”2 and with surprising candor he described sex to his mother-in-law as “a serious and delightful occupation.” Perhaps Winston applied the same energy and attention to the details of lovemaking as he did his other “occupations.” Within a month of their return from their honeymoon Clementine was pregnant.

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While the newlyweds were busy loving in Italy, Clementine’s cousin Venetia had traveled to Slains Castle to stay with Violet Asquith. A week after the wedding, Venetia burst into the dining room to announce that she could not find her friend, who had last been seen at dusk, book in hand, on a cliff-top path. Guests, servants and villagers were summoned to search the sharp rocks at the foot of the sixty-foot drop, shouting, “Violet!” into the moonless mist as the sea crashed angrily about them. It was treacherous work lit only by lanterns and toward midnight hopes started to fade. Her father sobbed into his wife Margot’s arms. She started to pray.

Shortly thereafter, cheers went up from some fishermen: Violet had finally been found unhurt on soft grass near the house and was already regaling her rescuers with thrilling tales of having slipped on the rocks and knocked herself unconscious. News got out and reporters quickly descended on the castle, demanding photographs and interviews. Sensational headlines such as MISS ASQUITH’S PERIL and HOUSE PARTY’S THRILLING SEARCH followed, but Violet’s eagerness to oblige the press led Margot to suspect

that the “accident” might not have been altogether accidental. Doctors could find no evidence of a blow to the head and the more Margot tried to avoid publicity, the more thrillingly near-fatal Violet’s story became. Some even began to speculate that Violet had attempted suicide, although it seems almost certain that she had merely intended “to cause [Winston] a pang.”3 Either way, Violet was becoming a specter at Clementine’s feast.

Margot removed Violet and the family from the eerie atmosphere at Slains, a vast, ancient and reputedly haunted castle perched on the edge of a desolate headland, but for some time after the so-called Rock Affair her stepdaughter continued to show signs of “almost hysterical”4 behavior. Violet’s father, the prime minister, feared more unhelpful attention and had to intervene personally to stop her racing off to meet Winston when he arrived back in Britain. With time, her mood calmed, and she finally returned to London. But Winston was still concerned, and in November he arranged for her to have lunch with him and his new wife. Violet behaved well, but the conversation was no doubt strained and the newly pregnant Clementine would not have been in her best form. Winston’s decision to catch a cab alone with his guest afterward appears thoughtless, but according to Violet’s account he was eager to impress upon her that Clementine “had more in her than met the eye.” With what Violet herself described as “cloying” self-restraint she responded: “But so much meets the eye.”5

Though mostly sensed rather than heard, the continuing criticism from such quarters was wreaking havoc on Clementine’s fragile confidence. Violet and her family were at the center of a snobbish circle of brilliant intellectuals with immense power and privilege. Her bosom pal Venetia, Clementine’s super-confident Stanley cousin, could finish the Times crossword without needing to write in a single letter. By contrast Violet thought Clementine “very nervous & excited in public” and prone to “beginning her sentences over & over again & constantly interrupting herself.” Her eyes, reputedly her best feature, were actually “tired & pink.” But Violet also noted that her figure was “Divine” and (rather condescendingly) that the content of her conversation was beginning to improve. Clementine, meanwhile, understandably enjoyed it when others turned a critical eye on Violet—although she would wisely refrain from joining in. She knew the esteem in which Winston held her rival and could not help but be jealous. The sentiment was mutual.

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Clementine’s pregnancy made Winston’s bachelor apartment in Bolton Street impracticable. Although fitted with electric lighting, it was tall and narrow with endless flights of stairs. Every surface—even in the bathroom—was covered with model soldiers, polo team photographs, tiny silver cannon or books. This was no place for Clementine to make her first real home, and by the time she returned from her honeymoon, it was even less so. Jennie had given her bedroom a surprise Edwardian makeover, dressing it with sateen bows for the full boudoir effect. A natural minimalist, Clementine could barely conceal her horror; she now considered her mother-in-law a “trial.”6

For her part, Jennie had welcomed Winston’s choice of bride but this marked the beginning of a fraught relationship between the two women. Clementine saw how Winston adored his mother despite her faults. She had seemed a “fairy princess” to him as a child, and later he had harbored somewhat Oedipal feelings for her. Aged twenty he had written in a letter: “How I wish I could secrete myself in the corner of the envelope and embrace you as soon as you tear it open.”7 Even now Winston often chose to walk arm in arm with his mother, leaving Clementine feeling like an intruder.

In recent years Jennie had marshaled her formidable intellect, contacts and womanly charms (although some argued not her critical faculties) to advance Winston’s career. Having pioneered the role first of active political wife and then mother, Jennie was a hard act for Clementine to beat. A flashing-eyed voluptuous beauty—once described as “more panther than woman”—and one of the first American heiresses to marry

into the British aristocracy, Jennie had many male admirers, including the king, but the bed-hopping that had lately benefited her son offended Clementine's rigid moral code, as did her marriage to the young and impecunious George Cornwallis-West, which she viewed as "vain and frivolous." (Cornwallis-West was in fact pursuing a flamboyant affair with the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell and the marriage ended as widely expected in 1914. Jennie cited his refusal to grant her conjugal rights as grounds for divorce and became dependent on her sons for support.)

When that marriage broke down, Clementine, according to her daughter Mary, "resented the way [Jennie] leant so heavily on her elder son . . . They never had a classic falling out. It's just that [Clementine] never joined in the chorus of praise for her mother-in-law."8 She also railed at Jennie's extravagance. Winston's mother, a friend explained, was a woman for whom "life didn't begin on a basis of less than forty pairs of shoes."

Clementine blamed Jennie for Winston's own excesses and was appalled to discover how she and her late first husband, Lord Randolph, had neglected their eldest son throughout his childhood. His mother, she felt, had only "discovered" Winston when he became "famous," after his father's death. While at school he had sent Jennie letter after letter pleading with her in vain to visit him, the crosses for his kisses so numerous they would fall off the page. At fourteen, Winston was still writing, "I long to see you my mummy," but Jennie considered him too "ugly," "slouchy and tiresome"9 to bother with. Her selfishness and his lack of a settled home life made him feel "destitute."10 For both Winston and Clementine a steady, loving childhood had been unknown.

Clementine could also empathize with Winston's pain at his father's obvious preference for his younger, less troublesome brother, Jack. Lord Randolph barely spoke to Winston unless to deliver a rebuke; some historians go so far as to suggest his father actively loathed his son. Winston was a disappointment to him: the poor results he achieved on his entrance exam consigned him to the bottom class at Harrow and he was considered not to have the brains for the bar, let alone Oxford, although the more enlightened teachers recognized that he had unusual gifts. Even by upper-class Victorian standards their parental neglect was unusual. Friends and relations would urge them to "make more" of Winston; one kindly soul, Laura, Countess of Wilton, even wrote to him as self-appointed "deputy mother," sending him money and food. Jennie failed even to remember her sons' birthdays.

As children both Winston and Clementine had relied on middle-aged women outside the family for emotional sustenance, in his case none more so than his nanny Mrs. Everest, whose unconditional love was the only thing that made him feel safe. It was she who had ensured Winston was extracted from a prep school where the sadistic headmaster repeatedly flogged him. Mrs. Everest had also tried to rein in his spending and instructed him to be a "kind" gentleman. He loved her gratefully, but his upbringing nonetheless left him selfish and "emotionally insatiable."11

A sickly youngster with a lisp and weak chest, Winston had been bullied at school—at seven he had on one occasion been pelted with cricket balls. Clementine had also been taunted in her early years by more rumbustious children and both had eventually developed strategies for self-protection—in his case naughtiness, in hers reserve—to hide their insecurities from public view. But neither had lost an instinctive sympathy for the underdog.

They both also knew what it was to lose a father and to endure a mother's "frantic sexual intrigue." Just as there were stories that she was not Hozier's child, it was rumored that Winston had been conceived before marriage. Witnessing Lord Randolph's public decline from young political titan to raging invalid had been a further agony for his son. Only twenty when his father died a grotesque death reputedly from syphilis in 1895, Winston never established a connection with him and always felt in his shadow. The penetrating

screams of Lord Randolph's last days may have contributed to his own rejection of casual sex.

Thus Winston, like Clementine, craved comfort and protection. Marriage allowed him to recapture that sense of security he had felt in Mrs. Everest's nursery, to be folded at long last within a woman's comforting embrace. Since his Victorian upbringing deterred him from talking about sex in an adult way, he adopted baby talk instead. He began addressing Clementine as "Puss Cat" or "Kat," while he became "My Sweet Amber Dog" or "Pug," and there was much mention of lapping cream and stroking warm, furry coats. Respectable women were in any case at this period presumed to be unburdened by libido, and Winston had a particular dislike for overt sexual predators.

Nor, again like Clementine, did he form close friendships easily. Precocious and bumptious, he had been unpopular with his peers as a child, probably not helped by the fact that his contacts outside the immediate family before he went to school were primarily with servants. When he twice failed to get into the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, the elite training academy for British Army officers, the specialist tutorial college he was sent to observed, "[T]he boy has many good points but what he wants is very firm handling."12

These were, then, two insecure people with much in common. One crucial difference was that Winston had spent much of his childhood at Blenheim Palace, while Clementine knew what it was like to live in cheap lodgings. He had always had servants and had never drawn his own bath or traveled on a bus. Just because he was now married and—as the son of a younger son in an aristocracy run on primogeniture—far from rich, he saw no reason for this to change. Clementine, a former habitué of the Dieppe fish markets, was terrified of spending money they did not have in an effort to live up to his exacting requirements.

In early 1909, they bought a lease on 33 Eccleston Square, a cream stucco house in semifashionable Pimlico. This was to be their first family home and Clementine was finally able to decorate in her own simple style, although she let herself go in her bedroom, where she appliquéd an Art Nouveau design of a large fruit tree in "shades of orange, brown and green."13 She never experimented so flamboyantly again, which is arguably just as well. A later tenant, the foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey, showed the mural to the French ambassador, who was reportedly struck with "horror." (But Grey also wrote to her saying Eccleston Square was the "nicest" house he had ever had in London and that it gave the "impression of belonging to nice people.")14

Clementine insisted on having her own bedroom from an early stage. Indeed, after Bolton Street the couple would not share a bed at home again. They kept different hours, she preferring to rise early and he to retire late. And it was not just the Sandhurst college that recognized he needed "very firm handling." Winston was quickly made to observe the "protocol of the bedchamber": Clementine needed refuge from her husband's "dominating brilliance," so he was allowed entry to her room by invitation only, thus placing him in the position of supplicant, always hoping to "kiss her dear lips" and "end up snugly" in her arms. Occasionally, upon turning in, she would leave a note indicating that he might be in luck that evening. But he could never bank on it.15

Winston was not the only member of the family who needed "handling." Jennie showed no signs of retreating gracefully, grabbing the chance to decorate her son's new bedroom and insisting on choosing the color for the front door. As Clementine's pregnancy progressed and she went to rest in the country, however, Winston chose to defer more frequently to his wife. He dutifully reported on marble basins, bookcases, paints and progress in chasing up the builders. He commended her on her thrift, which saw old carpets being reused despite the odd stain and shabby edges, while cheap linoleum was put down in the servants' rooms.

Clementine was seven months into her pregnancy before they were finally able to move in. She passed some

of the time at Blenheim with Goonie, the wife of Winston's brother, Jack, who was also expecting, and the two struck up a mutually supportive friendship, but she could not shake off her fears about the birth. Goonie—whose real name was Gwendoline—had her baby first and Winston used her "smooth and successful" delivery of a healthy boy to reassure Clementine. He insisted she had suffered little but was himself still nervous about the impending event: "I don't like your having to bear pain & face this ordeal. But . . . out of pain joy will spring."16

Not that his concern prevented him from leaving her on her own to pursue politics and steep himself in male society. At the end of May he went to Blenheim for the annual camp of the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars, of which he was an officer. He greatly enjoyed it but Clementine could not face a large house party. In those days expectant mothers were rarely seen and their condition barely alluded to (most thought the word pregnancy suitable only for medical books). So on June 1, just shy of a month before she was due to deliver, she went to stay in relative seclusion with Lady St. Helier's daughter in Buckinghamshire. At this point Clementine's old tremulous self returned to the fore. On her way she stopped for lunch at what looked like a "respectable" commercial travelers' hotel in Slough, only to be "terrified" when she found it "infested by several dirty men."17 On another occasion she locked herself in a train lavatory for fear of cutthroats climbing through a carriage window.

Although anxious about her well-being, Winston was unwilling to change his ways. Their frequent separations—a pattern that would last throughout their marriage—threw them into stark contrast with other political couples of the time. (Stanley Baldwin and his wife, Lucy, spent only one night apart in their entire life together.) These periods apart gave rise to some seventeen hundred letters, telegrams and notes between them that survive today, and a habit of putting their thoughts to paper that persisted even when they were under the same roof.

Diana Churchill was born at home on July 11, and although it was not yet customary for fathers to attend the actual birth, Winston was at least nearby. Even now, however, Violet remained in his thoughts; he wrote to her three days later claiming (unconvincingly) that Clementine had invited her to "come back again to see the baby." "After four almost any afternoon Miss Churchill receives,"18 he wrote proudly from his desk at the Board of Trade.

CLEMENTINE: THE LIFE OF MRS. WINSTON CHURCHILL BY SONIA PURNELL PDF

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CLEMENTINE: THE LIFE OF MRS. WINSTON CHURCHILL BY SONIA PURNELL PDF

"Sonia Purnell has at long last given Clementine Churchill the biography she deserves. Sensitive yet clear-eyed, Clementine tells the fascinating story of a complex woman struggling to maintain her own identity while serving as the conscience and principal adviser to one of the most important figures in history." –Lynn Olson, bestselling author of Citizens of London

Shortlisted for the 2016 Plutarch Award

A long-overdue tribute to the extraordinary woman behind Winston Churchill.

By Winston Churchill's own admission, victory in the Second World War would have been "impossible without her." Until now, however, the only existing biography of Churchill's wife, Clementine, was written by her daughter. Sonia Purnell finally gives Clementine her due with a deeply researched account that tells her life story, revealing how she was instrumental in softening FDR's initial dislike of her husband and paving the way for Britain's close relationship with America. It also provides a surprising account of her relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt and their differing approaches to the war effort.

Born into impecunious aristocracy, the young Clementine was the target of cruel snobbery. Many wondered why Winston married her, but their marriage proved to be an exceptional partnership. Beautiful and intelligent, but driven by her own insecurities, she made his career her mission. Any real consideration of Winston Churchill is incomplete without an understanding of their relationship, and Clementine is both the first real biography of this remarkable woman and a fascinating look inside their private world.

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Review
"Engrossing. . . . Purnell's book is the first formal biography of a woman who has heretofore been relegated to the sidelines."
–The New York Times

"Winston Churchill kept nothing from Clementine. "You know,"he informed FDR, "I tell Clemmie everything." Purnell has delivered an astute, pacey account of a woman who hardly ever emerged from the shadows. It is a sharp analysis of what it meant to be a politician's wife. . . [and] shows how much we can learn about Winston Churchill from his wife and marriage."

–The Wall Street Journal

“Thorough and engaging. . . Purnell’s extensive and insightful biography offers a much welcome portrait of Clementine Churchill, a woman whose remarkable life has long been overshadowed by her famous husband.”
—Washington Post

"Until this biography, Clementine’s influence had been completely overlooked and undervalued by Winston's biographers. Clementine was a complicated, mercurial figure, and Purnell does a wonderful job painting a full picture of a woman who was an excellent wife, a mediocre at best mother, and privy to some of the most profound moments of the modern era.
—Jessica Grose, in Lena Dunham's Lenny Letter

“Fascinating… [Purnell's] book may leave you thinking Clementine is one of the most underrated, complex women in British history.”
–The Daily Beast

“Sonia Purnell’s fine biography. . . brings out of the shadows this formidable woman who was much more than strictly a spouse.”
—Newsday

“A fascinating and well-written account of a woman who played a key role in many pivotal moments of early-20th-century British and world politics.”
—Minneapolis Star-Tribune

“A sharply drawn, absorbing portrait of Churchill’s elegant, strong-willed wife, who was also his adviser, supporter, protector, and manager. . . Purnell argues persuasively for Clementine's importance to history: she functioned as her husband's astute political strategist; insisted that he consider her feminist views; vetted his speeches; and campaigned for his successes. . . A riveting, illuminating life of a remarkable woman.
–Kirkus Reviews (Starred Review)

“[A] probing, well-researched and wise biography.”
—Washington Times

“This exemplary biography illustrates how Clementine’s intelligence, hard work, and perseverance in often difficult circumstances made her every bit a match for her remarkable, intimidating husband, and a fascinating figure in her own right.”
—Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)

“The extensive research shines a deserved spotlight on Britain’s first lady through wartime and beyond."
—Fort Worth Star-Telegram

“Purnell does a remarkable job of proving that Clementine had a large impact on Winston’s life. . . He seems to have known immediately upon meeting her that she would be the one who could support his great ambitions and moderate his mood swings and gambling. . . She edited his writing, advised him on political decisions, and volunteered in many ways throughout both world wars. Her significance, in many way, can be compared to that of Eleanor Roosevelt.”
--Library Journal

“Sonia Purnell has restored Clementine Churchill to her rightful place in history. Behind every great man there is a great woman–and this was especially true of Winston Churchill.Clementine is a fascinating portrait of a highly complex woman who only ever showed a brave and elegant face to the world. At last, thanks to Sonia Purnell’s excellent book, we see her true nature.
–Amanda Foreman, author of A World on Fire

“At last Sonia Purnell has given us the first political biography of Clementine Churchill, a woman of power and progressive vision. Although she was her husband's best guide and most astute advisor during the worst of times, her essential role is generally unacknowledged. Boldly written and illuminating, this is a generative restoration of a fascinating woman who transcended family grief and marital agonies to lead her husband and the nation with grace, commitment and persistence.”
–Blanche Wiesen Cook, author of Eleanor Roosevelt

“An acute and sympathetic biography which brings Clementine Churchill out of the shade into which her illustrious and domineering husband has cast her and shows how key she was to his success. Sonia Purnell makes us ask how Clementine endured life with Winston, and provides the answers.”
–Margaret MacMillan, author of Paris 1919 and The War that Ended Peace

"In this wonderful book Sonia Purnell has at long last given Clementine Churchill the biography she deserves. Sensitive yet clear-eyed, Clementine tells the fascinating story of a complex woman struggling to maintain her own identity while serving as the conscience and principal adviser to one of the most important figures in history. Purnell succeeds brilliantly at an almost impossible task: providing fresh and thought-provoking insights into Winston Churchill in the course of examining his complicated marriage. I was enthralled all the way through."
–Lynn Olson, bestselling author of Citizens of London and Those Angry Days

“An excellent book…Both scrupulous and fair-minded, Sonia Purnell has done her subject proud in this eye-opening and engrossing account of the strong-willed and ambitious woman without whom Winston Churchill’s political career would have been a washout.”
–Miranda Seymour, The Telegraph

“It seems extraordinary that no one has given this remarkable woman proper biographical treatment before. . . She sacrificed her children and her health in the greater service of her husband, but she also kept him buoyant. This book is a salutary reminder that the Churchills were always a team.”
–The Times (UK)

“Compellingly readable. . . Sonia Purnell’s biography of Winston’s wife Clementine brings her out from behind the shadow cast by the Great Man. She became her husband’s wise counselor, discreetly offering sound advice, re-writing his speeches, toning down his foolish or angry letters, preventing him from making certain terrible political mistakes. . . Her wheeling and dealing was done behind a veil of gracious femininity.”
–The Independent (UK)

“Eye-opening. . . A bold biography of a bold woman; at last Purnell has put Clementine Churchill at the center of her own extraordinary story, rather than in the shadow of her husband’s.”
–Mail on Sunday (UK)

“In our own era of sturdy individualism, it is remarkable to read of Clementine’s resolve to subordinate her own desires and her children’s happiness to her husband’s cause. . . An intriguing study of a character both

deeply flawed and, in her way, magnificent."
–The Evening Standard (UK)

About the Author
Sonia Purnell is a biographer and journalist who has worked at The Economist, The Telegraph, and Sunday Times. Her first book, Just Boris, a candid portrait of London mayor and Brexit champion Boris Johnson, was longlisted for the Orwell prize. Clementine, published as First Lady:The Life and Wars of Clementine Churchill in the UK, was chosen as a Book of the Year by The Telegraph and Independent and was shortlisted for the Plutarch Award. Residence: London, UK Social: Twitter: SoniaPurnell

Introduction

Late in the evening of Monday, June 5, 1944, Clementine Churchill walked past the Royal Marine guards into the Downing Street Map Room wearing an elegant silk housecoat over her nightdress. Still fully made up, she looked immaculate and, as always, serene. Around her the atmosphere was palpably tense, even frayed. She glanced at the team of grave-faced "plotters" busily tracking troops, trucks and ships on their charts. Then she cast her eyes over the long central table, whose phones never stopped ringing, to the far corner, where, as expected, she spotted her husband, shoulders hunched, face cast in agonized brooding. She went to him as she knew she must, for no one else—no aide, no general, no friend, however loyal—could help him now.

Clementine Churchill was one of a tiny group privy to the months of top secret preparations for the next morning's monumental endeavor. Fully apprised of the risks involved in what would be the largest seaborne invasion in history, she knew the unthinkable price of failure: millions of people and a vast swath of Europe would remain under Nazi tyranny, their hopes of salvation dashed. She also knew the ghosts that haunted Winston that night, the thousands of men he had sent to their deaths in the Dardanelles campaign of the First World War. She alone had sustained him through that disaster and the horrors of his time serving in the trenches on the Western Front.

Churchill had delayed the D-day operation for as long as he could to ensure the greatest chance of success, but now British, American and Canadian troops would in a few hours attempt to take a heavily fortified coastline defended by men who were widely regarded as the world's best soldiers. Huge convoys were already moving through the darkness toward their battle stations off the coast of Normandy. Earlier that evening, Winston and Clementine had discussed the prospects of the gambit's success, at length and alone, over a candlelit dinner. No doubt he had poured out his fears and she had sought, as so many times before, to stiffen his resolve. In the end, the command to proceed had been given.

Looking up now as she approached, Winston turned to his wife and said, "Do you realise that by the time you wake up in the morning twenty thousand men may have been killed?"1

• • •

To the outside world Winston Churchill showed neither doubt nor weakness. Since he had declared to the world in June 1940 that Britain would "never surrender," his was the voice of defiance, strength and valor.

Even Stalin, one of his fiercest critics, was to concede that he could think of no other instance in history when the future of the world had so depended on the courage of a single man.2 What enabled this extraordinary figure to stand up to Hitler when others all around him were crumbling? How did he find in himself the strength to command men to go to their certain deaths? How could an ailing heavy drinker and cigar smoker well into his sixties manage to carry such a burden for five long years, cementing an unlikely coalition of allies that not only saved Britain but ultimately defeated the Axis powers?

Churchill's conviction, his doctor Lord Moran observed while tending him through the war, began "in his own bedroom." This national savior and global legend was in some ways a man like any other. He was not an emotional island devoid of need, as so many historians have depicted him. His resolve drew on someone else's. In fact, Winston's upbringing and temperament made him almost vampiric in his hunger for the love and energy of others. Violet Asquith, who adored him all her life, noted that he was "armed to the teeth for life's encounter" but "also strangely vulnerable" and in want of "protection."3

Only one person was able and willing to provide that "protection" whatever the challenge, as she showed on that critical June night in 1944. Yet Clementine's role as Winston's wife, closest adviser and greatest influence was overlooked for much of her life, and has been largely forgotten in the decades since.

Neither mousy nor subservient, as many assume her to have been, Clementine Churchill was so much more than an extension of her husband. Like him, she relentlessly privileged the national interest above her health and family; her list of extramarital achievements would put many present-day government ministers, speechwriters, charity chiefs, ambassadors, activists, spin doctors, MPs and hospital managers to shame. Unlike Winston, she was capable of great empathy, and she had a surer grasp of the importance of public image. In her trendsetting sense of style she was a precursor to Jackie Onassis—with her leopard-skin coats and colorful chiffon turbans—and her skills as a hostess played a crucial role in binding America to the cause of supporting Britain. For all this and more, she was honored by three British monarchs, and by the Soviet Union. Just surviving, let alone shaping, what must surely count as one of the twentieth century's most challenging marriages should surely be a notable triumph in itself.

Winston once claimed that after their wedding they had simply "lived happily ever after." That is stretching the truth. There was never a break from the "whirl of haste, excitement and perpetual crisis"4 that surrounded them. She could not even talk to him in the bathroom without on occasion finding members of the cabinet in there, half-hidden by the steam. Nor were their exchanges always gentle. They argued frequently, often epically, and it was not for nothing that he sometimes referred to her as "She-whose-commands-must-be-obeyed."5 An opinionated figure in her own right, she was unafraid to reprimand him for his "odious"6 behavior, or to oppose privately his more noxious political beliefs; gradually she altered his Victorian outlook with what he called her "pinko" ideas and her support for women's rights. But however furiously they might have disagreed, she loved him and reveled in her union with a man so "exciting" and "famous." For his part, he simply doted and depended on her.

Throughout the first three decades of their marriage, Winston and Clementine were united by a common project: making him prime minister. When that goal was achieved, their aim changed and became survival itself. In peacetime, despite her misgivings about his refusal to give up politics, they were jointly dedicated to his legacy. Not only did they weather repeated public and personal humiliation together, they overcame the bitterest of personal tragedies and survived the all-but-intolerable strains of being at the center of two world wars. In so doing they forged one of the most important partnerships in history. The question is not just what she did for him, but what could he have done without her?

Even so, this formidable woman has virtually no public presence in popular history. While Churchill is understandably one of the most analyzed figures of all time, the preternaturally private Clementine has

remained overlooked and unexplained. She is so elusive that views differ on such basic questions as the color of her eyes (gray, blue or hazel-brown?7) and hair (ash-blond, brown or red?8). Many people think Winston's wife was the "American one," when in fact it was his mother, Jennie, who came from the US. Consult certain biographies of Winston Churchill and she features as barely more than a passing acquaintance. The index of Nigel Knight's Churchill: The Greatest Briton Unmasked, for instance, contains not one single reference to Clementine. Other biographers, such as Richard Hough, author of Winston and Clementine: The Triumph and Tragedies of the Churchills, go so far as to claim that she was a "nuisance" who added to rather than reduced the pressures on her husband.

It is certainly true that Clementine was sometimes rigid and unforgiving, but in these traditionally minded, one-sided accounts Winston's own testament to what she meant to him has been conveniently underplayed or misconstrued. So have the perspectives of the many generals, politicians, ambassadors, civil servants and assistants who worked closely with them both and became her fervent admirers. Even Lord Beaverbrook, the buccaneering newspaper magnate who was for a long time her most loathed personal enemy, became in the end a devoted fan. It is ironic and telling that many of these incidental observers are far better known than she.

Today we are fascinated by the deeds and dress of our contemporary First Ladies, on both sides of the Atlantic. In a different era Clementine largely, if not wholly, escaped such media scrutiny. She hardly courted the press on her own account—though she was a skillful operator on behalf of her chosen causes. Yet she was more powerful and in some ways more progressive than many of her modern successors. The struggles she endured still resonate—not least her grueling inner turmoil, which Winston found so difficult to understand. It is high time for a fresh appraisal of the woman behind this great but erratic man, one that will allow her contribution to be duly recognized.

The only existing account of Clementine's life—an admirable book by the Churchills' daughter Mary Soames—was, although later revised, first published nearly forty years ago. It understandably treats its subject from the family's viewpoint, with conspicuous gaps in the story. Since then many revealing papers—such as the Pamela Harriman collections at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC—have been released or have come to light for the first time, and several former staff have opened up about their experiences. What fascinates over and over again is the strength of the impression Clementine made on so many people, including allies from Russia, Canada, Australia and America, as well as those who witnessed her in action closer to home. Some contemporaries recorded a "physical shock" on meeting her for the first time. Who would have guessed that she laughed louder than Winston? That she was taller than him and decidedly more athletic? That he cried more than she did and owned more hats? That the camera never quite captured her startling beauty and that she could, like a princess, lift a room merely by entering it? Or that she was not the paradigm of upper-class matronliness but the surprising product of a broken home, a suburban grammar school and a lascivious mother, and that one of her most formative years was spent in and around the fish market at Dieppe?

This is not a history of the war, or a study of Winston Churchill from an alternative vantage point, although oft-neglected aspects of his character do come to the fore. It is, instead, a portrait of a shy girl from a racy background who was related to Britain's most glamorous aristocratic family (in more ways than one) but was looked down upon by her own mother and disdained by the dominant political dynasty of her day. It is the story of someone who feared casinos and bailiffs, and struggled to bond with her children. It is an attempt to recover the memory of a woman who married a man variously described as "the largest human being of our times" and "the stuff of which tyrants are made." (That he never became one is in no small part thanks to her.) Even before 1940 Clementine's life was packed with drama, heartache and endurance. But, colorful and troubled as her life had been thus far, all of that was merely a lengthy and exhaustive apprenticeship for her critical role as First Lady during her country's "death fight" for survival.

Before Clementine Britain had known merely the "politician's wife": opinionated, perhaps, but rarely directly involved in government business. And today we have much the same: women glossed up for the cameras on set-piece occasions, thin, smiling and silent. Her immediate successors—Violet Attlee in 1945 and Clarissa Eden in 1955—were of markedly lesser ambition and failed to pick up her baton. Clarissa, Anthony Eden's wife, was glamorous, younger, more intellectual and arguably more modern than Clementine (her aunt by marriage), but she lacked a populist touch and admits she was never even briefed on government business, and lacked "the gumption to ask." She said: "I can't believe how passive and hopeless I was."9 Clementine's postwar successor, Violet Attlee, was "jealous" of the time taken up by her husband's job10 and Harold Wilson's wife, Mary, was at first so overawed at being the prime minister's spouse that she would be physically sick every morning.11 Cherie Blair, probably the prime ministerial consort most involved in her husband's role since Clementine, explained the universal predicament thus: "There is no job description for the Prime Minister's spouse because there is no job. But there is a unique position that provides for each holder an opportunity and a challenge."12 How interesting that a woman born into the Victorian age, who never went to university, had five children and could not vote until her thirties, should have grasped that opportunity and challenge with greater ambition and success than any of those who have come since.

The case can be made that no other president or prime minister's wife has played such a pivotal role in her husband's government. It was arguably greater than that of even the greatest of American First Ladies, Clementine's direct contemporary Eleanor Roosevelt. This appears all the more remarkable in light of how poorly defined and resourced the position at 10 Downing Street is in comparison with that of American First Ladies. From the very earliest days of the Union the wife of the US president has enjoyed a status that, albeit not enshrined in the Constitution itself, provides an official platform for public work and influence, backed by the heavily staffed Office of the First Lady. Clementine had no official staff, role model or guidebook. She in effect invented her wartime role from scratch, and eventually persuaded an initially reluctant government to help her.

She never sought glory for her achievements and rarely received it. She was in fact genuinely astonished when noticed at all. Curiously, it was often visiting Americans who were most observant of the scale of her contribution during the war. The US ambassador Gil Winant was intensely moved when he accompanied her on a tour of bombed-out streets during the Blitz. As she talked to people left with little more than piles of rubble, he noticed the "great appreciation" she stirred in middle-aged women, who seemed inspired and uplifted by her presence. Marveling at the "deep" and "significant" looks of empathy that "flashed between her and these mothers of England," he was puzzled as to why the newspapers and indeed the British government made so little of what she did.13 Clementine's huge mailbag at the time was full of letters from people who were grateful for her help, people who viewed her as their champion. But while others, such as the queen, have been loudly and widely hailed for their war work, her part in the story seems to have been lost.

"If the future breeds historians of understanding," Winant wrote shortly after the return of peace, Clementine's "service to Great Britain" will finally be "given the full measure [it] deserves." This book attempts to do just that.

CHAPTER ONE

The Level of Events

1885–1908

Fear defined Clementine Hozier's earliest memory. Having been deposited by her nurse at the foot of her parents' bed, she saw her "lovely and gay" mother, Lady Blanche, stretch out her arms toward her. Clementine yearned for her mother's embrace yet she froze on the spot at the sight of her father slumbering at her mother's side. "I was frightened of him," she explained much later.1 By then the damage had been done. Clementine was never to gain a secure place in her mother's affections nor would she conquer her trepidation of the forbidding Colonel Henry Hozier, who, she came to believe, was not her father anyway. For all the fortitude she would show in adulthood, her instinctive insecurity never left her.

The Hoziers were living on Grosvenor Street, in central London, a far cry from the romantically haunted Cortachy Castle, in the Scottish Highlands, where Lady Blanche had grown up. Clementine's mother was the eldest daughter of the tenth Earl of Airlie, whose ancient Scottish lineage was enlivened by castle burnings and Jacobite uprisings. Her seraphic face belied her own rebellious spirit, and her parents, their family fortunes much reduced by the earl's gambling losses, had been keen to marry her off. They were thus relieved when in 1878, at the age of twenty-five, she became engaged to Colonel Hozier, even though he was fourteen years her senior and only come-lately gentry of limited means.

Lady Blanche's mother, also called Blanche, was a Stanley of Alderley, a tribe of assertive and erudite English matriarchs who combined radical Liberal views with upper-class condescension. They thought new clothes, fires in the bedroom and—above all—jam the epitome of excessive indulgence. Champions of female education, the Stanley women had cofounded Girton College in Cambridge in 1869. No less formidably clever than these eminent forebears, the elder Blanche had later mixed with the likes of the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, the Tory prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, his bitter Liberal rival William Gladstone, and John Ruskin, the art critic, designer and social thinker. She had made her ineffectual husband switch the family political allegiance from Conservative to Liberal and was equally forceful with her tearful granddaughter Clementine, who was not her favorite. It was evidently unfitting for a girl of Stanley blood to show her emotions.

Hozier's family made its money in brewing, gaining entrance to society thanks to the profits of industry rather than the privilege of birth. Although his elder brother became the first Lord Newlands and Henry himself received a knighthood in 1903 for his innovative work at Lloyd's of London after a distinguished career in the army, the Hoziers remained essentially nouveau: middle-class stock who earned their own living.

In the eyes of many in the City, Henry was a "flamboyant" personality, but the Lloyd's archives suggest a darker nature. He had graduated top of his class from Army Staff College and was decorated with the Iron Cross by Emperor Wilhelm I when serving as assistant military attaché to the Prussian forces during the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, and this and his service in Abyssinia and China appear to have gone to his head. His colleagues at Lloyd's thought he was a "born autocrat" with an "excessive love of power" and an absence of humor. He also apparently suffered from an "excessive" fondness for spending the corporation's money. An internal investigation in 1902 revealed that his business methods, while productive, were of "doubtful ethics." Some of his soi-disant successes were, in truth, exaggerated or unfounded, and after he challenged one persistent critic to a duel in 1906, his reputation inside the upper echelons of Lloyd's never quite recovered.2 Clementine was probably unaware of these stains on his character, admitting in a booklet she wrote for her own children, entitled "My Early Life," that she knew very little about her father's existence outside the home.

The earl considered his son-in-law a "bounder," and Lady Blanche soon discovered to her horror that her husband's previous career giving orders in the army had led him to expect the same unquestioning obedience at home. Far from liberating her from parental control, marriage to the splenetic and vengeful Henry proved even more restrictive. Before her wedding, Lady Blanche had assumed that she would become a notable

political hostess in her own right. After leaving the military in 1874 Hozier had briefly dabbled in public life—standing unsuccessfully in 1885 as the Liberal Unionist candidate for Woolwich and helping to pioneer the idea of an intelligence service—but he had not the remotest interest in hosting his wife's freewheeling aristo friends. Nor did he want children. Lady Blanche decided that she would take the matter into her own hands if he refused to oblige her. It was not helpful that Hozier was frequently away on business and unfaithful himself. Sexy, bored and lonely, Lady Blanche saw no reason not to shop around for a worthy mate of her own.

Five years after her wedding day, on April 15, 1883, she gave birth to her first child, Kitty. Two years later, on April Fools' Day, Clementine (rhyming with mean, not mine) was born in haste on the drawing room floor. The twins—Nellie and William (Bill)—came three years later. It is now thought that none of the four children was Hozier's and that there may in fact have been more than one biological father. Although it was not unusual for upper-class couples in the late nineteenth century to take lovers, the custom was to wait until an heir had been born before playing the field. Discretion was also expected. Lady Blanche ignored all the rules to such an extent that there were rumors of altercations between rivals. Indeed, she is reputed to have juggled up to ten lovers at once—a feat of athletic organization that she was pleased to advertise quite widely.

Clementine had no knowledge of all this as a child, and the family has only in recent years publicly acknowledged the question marks over her paternity. Doubts were, however, well aired by others during her lifetime. Lady Blanche's own, albeit inconsistent, confessions to friends suggest that Clementine was in fact a Mitford. Her handsome and generous brother-in-law, the first Baron Redesdale, Bertie Mitford, was certainly a favored amour. Photographs of Clementine and Bertie—particularly in profile—suggest remarkable similarities, not least their fine aquiline noses. Perhaps it was as a tribute to her sister's forbearance in sharing her husband in this way that Lady Blanche named her second daughter after her. Bertie's legitimate son David went on to father the six renowned Mitford sisters: the novelist Nancy, the Nazi supporters Unity and Diana (whose brother Tom shared their fascist sympathies), the Communist Decca and Debo, later Duchess of Devonshire, and Pamela, who largely escaped public scrutiny.

Besides Mitford, the other prime candidate is Bay Middleton, an avid theatergoer of great charm and private melancholy. He later broke his neck steeplechasing but was a frequent visitor to Lady Blanche during the years when she conceived her two eldest daughters. She dropped hints to notable gossips that he was the one, although some have since suggested that this was a fig leaf for her sister's sake. Such was the complexity of Lady Blanche's sex life that we shall probably never know the truth. Clementine's daughter Mary Soames found it "difficult to take a dogmatic view," saying, "Je n'y ai pas tenue la chandelle."3

The excitable younger Mitfords relished their great-aunt's racy reputation, but the rest of Lady Blanche's family thought her "mad." London's more respectable drawing rooms were similarly scandalized by the public uncertainty over the Hozier children's paternity, with the result that Lady Blanche was regularly snubbed. Meanwhile, her children were cared for by a succession of grumpy maids and governesses who vented their frustration by swishing their wards' bare legs with a cane. The one kindly soul in those early years was sixteen-year-old Mademoiselle Elise Aeschimann, a Swiss governess who arrived when Clementine was three. She thought the infant girl starved of attention and took to carrying her around everywhere, despite Lady Blanche's admonitions not to spoil her. Mademoiselle Aeschimann started Clementine and Kitty on their lessons, especially French, and though she stayed only two years her warmheartedness made a lasting impression. Clementine later went to visit her in Switzerland and even helped her financially when she fell on hard times in old age.

Clementine remained an anxious child, however, and was tormented by a perfectionist streak. According to her daughter Mary she had a "most sensitive conscience, and suffered untold miseries if the immaculate

white of her lace-edged pinafore was marred by spot or stain."4 She took endless pains to form the neatest handwriting, a trait that led the adult Clementine to describe her younger self as a "detestable little prig."5 Her principal emotional crutch was a large black pet poodle called Carlo, which devotedly listened to her troubles until it was tragically killed under the wheels of a train. Clementine had been ordered to leave the dog behind at the family's new home, a country house outside Alyth in Scotland, but Carlo had pursued her to the station and tried to jump on board. "I do not remember getting over this," she told her children many years later.6 Such emotional neediness—and a continuing fear of adults—earned her much maternal scorn. Kitty, by contrast, was puckish, pretty, shared her mother's extroverted flamboyance and won Lady Blanche's effusive love. Unsurprisingly, she became accustomed to getting her way—even once threatening to burn down the house to stop a governess from reporting her latest misdeed. Lady Blanche's devoted preference for her firstborn was brazen and consistent.

In autumn 1891, Hozier sued for divorce and the two elder girls became "helpless hostages" in a bitter battle over custody and financial support. Clementine was just six when she and Kitty were wrested from their mother and sent to live with their father and his sister, the spinster Aunt Mary, who believed children benefited greatly from being whipped. Hozier found the girls an inconvenience, so he parceled them off to a governess in the Hertfordshire town of Berkhamsted. Rosa Stevenson advanced her charges little academically but both girls observed her fastidious housekeeping, including the two hours spent every day polishing the oil lamps: "They burnt as bright and clear as stars," Clementine remembered fondly.7 She also recalled the delicious sausages, "although the slices were too thin and too few."

Sadly, Aunt Mary considered Mrs. Stevenson too soft and uprooted the girls again, this time dispatching them to a "horrible, severe"8 boarding school in Edinburgh. The odor of yesterday's haddock and the crumbs on the floor offended Clementine, and like her sister she felt desperately homesick.

Hozier finally relented and allowed Lady Blanche to extract her unhappy daughters and whisk them back to her rented house in Bayswater, a district then known among the smart set as the West London "wildlands." Waiting for them there were the four-year-old twins Bill and Nellie, who, after a year apart from their elder siblings, no longer recognized them. Hozier came for tea on a couple of occasions but his awkward visits were not a success and soon stopped altogether. Once the divorce was finalized, almost all of his financial support dried up. Lady Blanche may have had her children back, but she was now dependent on her own cash-strapped family for handouts.

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Over the following eight years, Lady Blanche and her brood led a peripatetic existence, moving from one set of furnished lodgings to another. In part this was out of financial necessity, to keep one step ahead of her creditors, but the constant roaming also suited her capricious nature. She ensured every new home was elegant and fresh, with snowy white dimity furniture covers (always two sets so they could be kept spotlessly clean) and fine muslin curtains on the windows. Clementine was enraptured by her mother's ability to spin comfort out of the least promising circumstances, writing in "My Early Life": "She had very simple but distinguished taste and you could never mistake a house or room in which she had lived for anyone else's in the world." Lady Blanche's exalted standards even inspired a new verb: to "hozier" became synonymous among her daughters' friends with to "tidy away." Unfortunately the cost of such stylish homemaking pushed the family ever further into debt.

In an effort to earn her keep, Lady Blanche, who was an excellent cook, wrote culinary articles for the newspapers, but she sometimes found herself too bored or distracted to put food on the table for her own offspring. She was frequently absent (presumably with one of her many lovers) but if her children sometimes wanted for maternal attention they rarely went short of instruction. Their mother employed full-time French-

or German-speaking governesses and other teachers were brought in as required. The only, rigidly observed, omission from their education was arithmetic, which Lady Blanche deemed “unseemly” for girls.

Around 1898, when Clementine was thirteen, Lady Blanche decamped from London for rooms near the railway station at Seaford, just east of the English Channel port of Newhaven. There she lived with her dogs Fifinne and Gubbins on the first floor at 9 Pelham Place, a modest gray terrace house, while Clementine, Kitty, Nellie, Bill and their “feather-headed” governess stayed at number 11. Lady Blanche refused to muzzle her dogs, in contravention of strict new antirabies laws, and was once summoned to the magistrates’ court in Lewes. Although she emerged from the trial with the desired “not guilty” verdict, perhaps due to the fact that one member of the bench was a personal friend, Clementine was troubled by her mother’s being “not very law-abiding.”9

This rackety existence could not have been in starker contrast to the four weeks the children spent every summer with their grandmother in the historic splendor of Airlie Castle. Here Lady Blanche’s mother, the Dowager Countess of Airlie, kept an unblinking vigil against any hint of a lack of gratitude—a subject upon which she had written an essay—insisting on the need to instill this virtue in young children as “otherwise they grow up louts.”10 She believed in fasting to “awaken the gifts of the Spirit” and loathed unladylike pursuits. Lady Blanche allowed Kitty and Clementine to play croquet (a practice that would later prove extremely useful) but only behind the gardener’s cottage, out of Grannie’s sight. She may have had a fiery temperament but her natural rebelliousness provoked her to give her daughters what were then unusual freedoms. Not only did she hire bicycles for them back in Seaford (with their being too expensive to buy), she allowed them to play bicycle polo on the rough grass opposite their lodgings too. Another beloved, unfeminine pastime was cricket, at which Clementine would in time become a decent player. She was also taught locally to play a creditable game of golf.

By now Clementine and Kitty were quite different: the former plain and awkward; the latter pretty and flirty—albeit impudent and ruthless as well. Clementine stood in her boisterous sister’s shadow but never showed any jealousy. In fact she found Kitty a comfort in a bewildering world. The star relied on a devoted supporting act, and while this role was far from easy it was nonetheless one in which Clementine came to excel. Like Lady Blanche, she was “dazzled” by her sister. Kitty, meanwhile, shared her younger sibling’s “unspoken contempt” for their mother’s “violent, ungovernable partiality.” “You mustn’t mind it,” she would counsel Clementine. “She can’t help it.”11

Clementine’s plight won sympathy from at least one of Lady Blanche’s friends—Mary Paget, a tenderhearted woman who often invited the girl to stay at her nearby home, West Wantley. Clementine adored the sixteenth-century manor with its ducks, chickens and boating lake, and envied the Pagets their stable family life. She considered Mary, who was her only real childhood friend, to be the most beautiful woman in the world. In truth, Mary was handsome but plump, and sometimes her stays would burst open while she was gardening. She pinned false gray hair into her rather sparse bun and it would habitually fall out among the flower beds.

Clementine’s fondness for this generous woman made her return to Seaford all the more wrenching at the end of the golden weeks spent in her care. Many tears would be shed, and noticing Clementine’s reddened eyes, Lady Blanche once angrily accused her of loving Mary Paget more than her. To which Clementine rashly replied: “Of course I do.”12 The Wantley trips were stopped.

With no real home or father, scant money and precious little maternal love, it is perhaps unsurprising that on the cusp of her adolescence Clementine entered an emotionally religious phase. She yearned for respectability and certainty, and in November 1898, she was confirmed in Kirriemuir Church, near Lady Blanche’s family seat, watched by her mother, grandmother and Mary Paget. Her piety became so fervent

that on one occasion, after listening to a sermon on charity, she donated a pendant given to her by a relative, only to be admonished for giving away such a valuable gift and compelled to ask for its return.

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By the summer of 1899 Lady Blanche was deeply in debt. Hozier had failed to provide even the meager allowance he had agreed to following the divorce, but governesses still had to be paid, and then there were the annual fees for Bill's education at Summer Fields preparatory school in Oxford. Lady Blanche wanted him to benefit from the sort of schooling expected of the grandson of an earl, but her mother's help extended only so far, and lawyers instructed to pursue Hozier by her brother Lord Airlie had drawn a blank. Lady Blanche's financial straits had been worsened by illness. Over the spring months she had suffered from quinsy, a nasty complication of tonsillitis involving abscesses on the throat. In the age before antibiotics, it was a serious condition and she was laid low, finding it difficult to swallow. She was hardly in a fit state to up sticks once again, yet in the last week of July, out of the blue, the children were told they had just hours to pack all their possessions as the next morning they were moving to France.

Lady Blanche had long suspected that Hozier might try to snatch back Kitty and Clementine and it appears she suddenly had reason to suspect a strike was imminent. It was this fear that had motivated her curious decision to move to Seaford, as the town lay a mere five hours across the English Channel from their destination, Dieppe. Such was the haste of their departure that she had no time to plan what they would do once they reached France. Family lore has it that she chose where to go on arrival with the toss of a coin. What we do know is that she hailed a cab for Puys and, upon spotting an attractive farm, La Ferme des Colombiers, along the way, ordered the driver to stop so that she might ask the owners if they had spare rooms. Luck was on her side and the family stayed there for the next two months, enjoying an idyllic summer of swimming and picnics. Clementine was living out of a suitcase once again.

In the autumn Lady Blanche moved her brood into town, renting a modest redbrick house at 49 rue du Faubourg de la Barre in Dieppe itself, where she hoped to enroll the girls in the school at the Convent of the Immaculate Conception. Already an adept French speaker, Clementine adjusted well to her new setting, but she was keenly aware of her outsider status. When the nuns and other girls sided against the British following the outbreak of the Second Boer War in October 1899, she and Kitty played truant in protest, idling away the morning forlornly on the beach. Nonetheless, she enjoyed her surroundings. Much of her time was spent outdoors, and she became more athletic and confident, displaying a competitive streak on the hockey field, where she broke her stick during a particularly fierce bout with an opposing center-forward.

Lady Blanche made the best of her exile. She relished Dieppe's bohemian lifestyle, which attracted foreign writers and artists such as Oscar Wilde, Max Beerbohm and Walter Sickert. She also enjoyed the casino, quickly becoming a regular. Needless to say, she lost money she did not have, and to Clementine's shame, the family was forced to ask for credit in the local shops. She was learning all too young to deal with public humiliation, and it was difficult not to blame her mother for their plight. Here was the source of a lifelong puritan streak; her fear of gambling never left her—indeed, it would later come to haunt her in the most horrific fashion.

Clementine's acute discomfort was not shared by her mother. Still beautiful at forty-seven, Lady Blanche continued to walk proud. The Dieppois were intrigued by this titled lady who ignored the fashions of the day, replacing the customary hat perched on a bun with a stylish mantilla and long plait down her back. Nor did Lady Blanche's daughters escape her cut-price interpretation of la mode—when Kitty, Clementine and their younger sister, Nellie, went shopping in the markets they did so clothed in cheap gingham dresses.

Clementine was embarrassed by these deviations from upper-class norms but whatever their attire, the girls'

beauty was making an impact. While Kitty was more striking, with her long dark hair and deep blue eyes, the slender, tall and fairer Clementine was finally beginning to blossom. The painter Walter Sickert, a frequent visitor, flirted with the older girl but he took Clementine more seriously. He once invited her to tea alone at his lodgings where he lived with Madame Augustine Villain, his mistress, model and landlady, and the acknowledged queen of the Dieppe fish market. Madame Villain had several children who looked uncannily like Sickert, but he also seems, to Clementine's horror, to have been involved with Lady Blanche. "She remembered terrible rows between her mother, Mr. Sickert and the fishwife," recalls Shelagh Montague Browne, who later worked for Clementine. "It was a ménage. The fishwife would be throwing things in the market in a jealous temper. Clementine thought it all so unseemly."

For all Sickert's reputation at the time as a figure of, at best, questionable morals known for his paintings of explicit nudes, Lady Blanche allowed her fourteen-year-old daughter to go unchaperoned to his house. (Later in life Clementine herself developed a poor opinion of Sickert, once telling Cecil Beaton, "He was, without doubt, the most selfish human being I've ever come across,"13 and the crime writer Patricia Cornwell has recently suggested—though her thesis is much disputed—that he might even have been Jack the Ripper.) Following her mother's instructions, Clementine made her way up to Sickert's room. Finding him absent and the place a shambles, she followed her instincts and tidied up, throwing away the remains of a herring on the table. When Sickert returned, he angrily informed her that she had discarded the subject of his next painting. She was terrified at first but they soon sat down to chat over brioches and tepid cider. By the time she emerged, her intelligence and poise had won his admiration.

One snowy winter's night late in 1899, Lady Blanche's fears were confirmed. She was with Kitty, Clementine and Sickert in her sitting room, which looked directly out onto the street. The fire was lit but the curtains not yet drawn when Clementine noticed a strange male figure at the window. Before she could look again, her mother had grabbed her and Kitty and pushed them both onto the floor. The mysterious man stared and stared through the glass while they continued to lie prostrate out of sight. When he finally turned away, they heard the doorbell ring, but as Kitty rose to answer it her mother sharply pulled her back down. After an interminable wait, they heard the man walk away at last, and Lady Blanche revealed to the astonished girls that he was their father. She sent Kitty into the hall to see if he had left a letter.

Kitty returned with two, one for her, one for Clementine; they contained invitations from Hozier to dine and lunch with him in a private room at the Hôtel Royal on succeeding days. Clementine pleaded to be allowed not to go but her mother insisted they should; their trusty French maid Justine would accompany them to and from the hotel (although she would not be in attendance during the actual meals).

After Kitty's uneventful dinner, it was Clementine's turn for lunch. This time, Hozier tried to banish Justine from returning to collect her young mistress, insisting that he would escort his daughter home himself. Clementine directed an imploring look at her maid, begging her not to desert her, and during the meal of omelet and larks-en-brochette she was virtually speechless from anxiety. Hozier then delivered the dreaded news: she was to come to live with him, or rather with the whip-happy Aunt Mary.

Faced with this unthinkable prospect, Clementine exhibited a hitherto undetected determination and courage. While surreptitiously slipping on her gloves under the table, she announced calmly that her mother would refuse to allow her to leave Dieppe. The moment the faithful Justine returned for her, she rose from her chair and politely but firmly bade Hozier good-bye. In a fury, he suddenly barred her way, thrusting a gold coin into Justine's hand and pushing her violently out the door as he did so. Clementine was now trapped and alone with him once more, but when he moved to fetch a cigar, she valiantly seized her chance, flung the door open and ran full pelt toward Justine, who was waiting uncertainly outside. The two girls scrambled away as fast as they could on the icy pavements with Hozier, swearing angrily, in pursuit. Only once they neared the safety of the house did he finally give up and turn back.

The bank manager and the captain of the Dieppe–Newhaven steamer later confirmed that Hozier had been planning to kidnap Clementine and take her back to England that very afternoon. Her quick thinking had saved her. As her future husband would later put it, Lady Blanche's once timorous daughter had displayed an exceptional ability to "rise to the level of events."

Scarcely had one crisis passed before another came to test her. Just a few weeks later, in February 1900, Kitty contracted typhoid, probably from contaminated water. Clementine and Nellie were quickly sent away, making the long journey to relatives in Scotland alone. Fearing the effect on Kitty if she knew her sisters were leaving, Lady Blanche told them to say "good night" rather than "good-bye." The last they saw of Kitty, as they closed the door, was a silent and emaciated figure confined to bed.

With Bill already back at school in England, Lady Blanche was now free to pour all her energies into saving her sick child. She was helped by Sickert, who carried bucket after bucket of ice up to the girl's room in a bid to reduce her raging fever. But despite all her mother's efforts, Kitty died a month before her seventeenth birthday. Her body was taken back to England, where Lady Blanche pointedly chose to bury her beloved daughter at the Mitfords' home at Batsford rather than the family seat of Cortachy.

Clementine cut a lonely figure in the family now, for she was a young woman of nearly fifteen while the twins were three years younger and still children. Nor could her mother, who was never the same again, reach out to her. There was no enmity between them but their grief brought a further distancing. Clementine was never to know the full, undivided warmth of a mother's love and now she had lost the elder sibling who had understood and appreciated her. She became protective of her little sister, Nellie, but Lady Blanche also soon transferred her attentions to her youngest daughter, leaving Clementine out in the cold once more.

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Their time in Dieppe was now over. Less than a year after leaving England, the family was uprooted yet again and returned to the picturesque suburban town of Berkhamsted, which offered cheap accommodation near a railway service to London and good inexpensive schools. They moved into an unpretentious Georgian terraced house on the high street, not far from where Clementine had stayed with Rosa Stevenson nine years earlier. She liked her new home, with its long narrow garden running up the hill at the back, and, despite the tragedy of losing Kitty, she was about to embark on what were probably the happiest and certainly the most settled years of her early life. Two months after her sister's death, Clementine started at the local grammar school, Berkhamsted School for Girls.

The experience was to change her outlook completely. Here she was fortunate to enjoy an education superior to that received by other aristocratic girls still tutored by governesses at home. A staff of clever, dedicated and often humorous female teachers quickly recognized her potential. Clementine was mixing with the largely friendly daughters of shopkeepers and doctors and both she and Nellie acclimatized quickly to all that provincial grammar school life entailed. Any awkwardness she might have felt in joining the school at fifteen, after her rackety aristocratic upbringing and with precious little formal schooling behind her, seems quickly to have dissipated. She had a particular fondness for her French teacher Mademoiselle Kroon, who would rouse daydreaming pupils with such lines as "Now, you fat bolster, wake up!" and she liked the company of her classmates. Indeed, she would seek them out again in later life, and would read the school magazine until her death. Seventy years after she left, Berkhamsted School was represented at her funeral.

On the family's return to England, Hozier asked to see Clementine once again. This time Lady Blanche accompanied her to his house in North Audley Street, London, but as she was taking leave of her daughter Hozier came to the door. He flew into a rage at the sight of his wife, leading to an ugly scene in the street and further mortification for Clementine. She had no way of knowing that this was the last time she would see

this “strange, violent yet most compelling man.”14 Despite her fear of her ostensible father, she later came to regret that Hozier, who died in Panama in 1907 at the age of sixty-nine, a year before her wedding, would never meet her future husband.

Back in the safe and studious atmosphere of Berkhamsted School, Clementine continued to thrive. Starting in what would now be tenth grade, she was quickly promoted to senior French. Lady Blanche’s aversion to the teaching of sums, however, accounted for a humiliating demotion to a lower year for math. While Nellie was relaxed about her studies—preferring to devote her energies to captaining the girls’ cricket team—Clementine was highly competitive. Nearly half a century later, when she returned to give a speech on the school’s Commemoration Day in 1947, she spoke of the joy her education had brought her. “I loved it,” she told the girls. “I felt I was out in the world, and on my own, away from the fiddling little tasks of arranging the flowers, folding the newspapers and plumping up the cushions.”

Prizes came quickly. In 1901, she won a solid silver medal for French presented by the French ambassador, and even Lady Blanche now recognized her daughter’s potential. The following year she treated Clementine to a trip to Paris with a former governess, Mademoiselle Louise Henri. Having been told to stay as long as they could on £25, they eked out this sum by barely eating. They visited museums, lectures and art galleries and Mademoiselle Henri gave Clementine thrilling glimpses of another world, pointing out famous music hall artistes in the street. Sickert, who turned up out of the blue one evening, also took her to meet the painter Camille Pissarro, who lived in a garret, and then to dinner in an elegant house where everything was “exquisite”—the food, the furniture, the host’s manners. Clementine lapped up every minute; she now thirsted for worldly knowledge and experience.

Encouraged by her headmistress Beatrice Harris, whose embrace of feminine independence and suffragist views would have an enduring influence on Clementine, she was secretly nursing dreams of academia. University for women was still a comparative novelty, but Miss Harris (who later described her former pupil to Winston as “one of the high lights of the school” and “a worthy helpmeet”15) was so confident of Clementine’s chances that she offered to take her in over the holidays to continue her studies. This was going too far for Lady Blanche; she wanted her daughter to be well educated but not a bluestocking spinster. She rejected Miss Harris’s generous offer and set about sabotaging Clementine’s studious ambitions by diverting her into trivial traditionally feminine pursuits. Undeterred, Clementine crept up to the graveyard on the hill behind the house to study mathematics in secret, her books arranged across the flat tombstones. She was further spurred on in her studies by her great-aunt Maude Stanley, the sister of Lady Blanche’s mother, who also introduced her to the exciting world of politics. A kindly intellectual spinster in her late sixties who took a great interest in the welfare of women and the poor, Maude considered Clementine a kindred spirit.

In the tussle over Clementine’s future, however, Lady Blanche held the trump card. To stop this university nonsense once and for all she approached another relative, the wealthy Lady St. Helier, an aunt by marriage, and enlisted her help in launching Clementine into the world to which, by birth and upbringing, Lady Blanche deemed that she “properly” belonged. (Her own reputation and financial difficulties meant that she could do little to advance her daughter herself.)

Lady St. Helier—popularly known as Lady Santa Claus—loved to help the young. One of her beneficiaries, for whom she had pulled some strings in the British Army, was a certain Winston Churchill, the son of her American friend Lady Randolph Churchill, known to her closest friends as Jennie. Now here was a poor—and beautiful—female relation also in need of her support. Lady St. Helier invited Clementine to stay at her distinguished London mansion at 52 Portland Place, near Regent’s Park, and bought her a gown. She took her to lavish balls and glittering dinners, where, no longer eclipsed by Kitty, Clementine was fêted for her beauty. Sure enough, she was distracted from her schoolbooks and her head was turned. The possibility of leading an independent life at university and beyond had glimmered briefly but was now snuffed out

forever.

By the time Clementine passed her Higher School Certificate in the summer of 1903, there was no more talk of academia. She left Berkhamsted and Miss Harris behind, albeit with happy and grateful memories. Lady Blanche had been so successful at dispensing with Clementine's academic ambitions that she saw fit to reward her daughter by taking a house for them that winter in Paris, in the rue Oudinot in the seventh arrondissement. She even permitted Clementine to attend a few lectures at the Sorbonne. More to Lady Blanche's taste, however, was the fashionable Voisin, a smart restaurant near the Palais Royal. Clementine loved the glamour but worried that such lavish spending was unwise. Lady Blanche explained that it was merely part of a civilized education, and in truth the grammar school pupil was feeling ever more at home in high society. In the spring of 1904, she was sent to stay for three months with the von Siemens family, the founders of the German electrical engineering company of the same name, in a beautiful house on the lake in Wannsee, a fashionable suburb of Berlin. Here she perfected her schoolgirl German, learned to ride and absorbed all that upper-class Berlin life could offer. A certain Continental polish merely inflated her reputation. On her return to London there were plenty of invitations and soon lots of suitors too, with Nellie jokingly keeping a "file" of proposals under "Discussed," "Answered" and "Pending."

Chief among the pending was the eligible Sidney Cornwallis Peel. The younger son of a viscount (and grandson of former prime minister Sir Robert Peel), he was constant, fifteen years her senior and rich. He took her to the theater and sent her white violets every day. Lady St. Helier thought her job was done. But Clementine was a romantic, and she knew she was not in love. Despite all the pressure from her relatives to accept his hand, poor Sidney was simply not exciting; his letters veered from pleading to peevish and were generally, as he conceded himself, rather dull. He appears to have sensed that she was underwhelmed, writing in one of the few that have survived: "It was stupid of me to allow myself to be goaded into a black rage."16 She broke off one engagement but was later secretly betrothed to him for a second time.

Then, in April 1906, she found her nerve again—at her cousin Sylvia Stanley's wedding. Sylvia was in pain from a broken arm but insisted that the ceremony go ahead. Her passionate determination to marry the man she loved contrasted sharply with Clementine's own tepid feelings and she parted from Sidney for the last time.

Afterward she seems to have panicked; after all, she needed to escape from her mercurial mother and what she would later confess to have been a "very difficult childhood."17 Within weeks she was engaged again, this time to Lionel Earle, a wealthy civil servant with intellectual tastes. He was twice her age, and she had known him for barely a month. When he joined her for a fortnight's holiday in the Netherlands, she saw him for the pompous bore he really was. Distraught, she broke off yet another engagement and had to return early wedding presents. The resulting emotional stress led to two months in bed.

Now that Nellie had also finished school, Lady Blanche gave up the lease on the house in Berkhamsted and moved to London to take a firmer hand in her daughters' social careers. It is not clear how she financed the rent, but Lady Blanche first opted for 20 Upper Phillimore Place, in Kensington, where Clementine had no choice but to earn her keep, supplementing her small allowance by giving French lessons at a half crown an hour. A year later Lady Blanche moved again, this time more permanently, to a cream-painted stucco house nearby at 51 Abingdon Villas (not then a modish address). Here Clementine also began working for her cousin Lena Whyte's dressmaking business. Needlework bored her, but she learned to make clothes and even hats—for herself as well as for clients. Later she compared these years to the struggles of Scarlett O'Hara, the heroine of Gone with the Wind, who keeps up appearances by making her gowns from old curtains.18

It was a very different existence from the idle luxury in grand houses enjoyed by her Stanley cousins Sylvia and Venetia, or the aristocratic circles in which her mother wanted her to move. Her clothes, for all Lady St.

Helier's generosity and her own needle and thread, made her feel like an outsider. So too did her inability to return hospitality. She was all too aware of the sniggers about her lack of fortune and knew that the less charitable found a snobbish glee in calling her "the Hozier." She was also considered cold; but while certainly reserved, she was in the main trying to protect herself in a world that was both cliquey and savage. "Nobody knew who I was, so I felt terribly out of place," she recalled to one of her assistants later in life. "I hated it."19

Dressing in this era of upper-class Edwardian leisure was time-consuming and expensive, a process that involved high-maintenance coiffures, hats and numerous outfits. Just one "Saturday to Monday" country house weekend required several large trunks of different clothes, as outfits were changed four times a day. For her peers, there were servants who washed, starched, ironed, stitched, fetched and brushed and pinned up hair, whereas Clementine performed most of these chores herself. It is little surprise that as soon as she could afford one in later life she insisted on hiring a lady's maid, and kept one long after the role had largely gone out of fashion.

Lack of an adequate wardrobe meant that some invitations had to be refused, but Clementine had inherited her mother's genius for making the simplest outfits elegant. She was usually able to hold her own for an evening at least. Several contemporary accounts pour praise on her beauty. The diarist Lady Cynthia Asquith wrote that she should have been a queen, describing her as "classical, statuesque, yet full of animation . . . her superbly sculpted features would have looked so splendid on a coin."20 The society magazine the Bystander described Clementine in a 1908 issue as having "most delicately aquiline features, fine grey eyes, and a delightful poise of the head" with "the grace and distinction and soft strength of early Grecian art: she is divinely tall." Sir Alan Lascelles, the future royal secretary and most pernickety of aesthetes, told Clementine's daughter Mary that he would never forget his first glimpse of her mother in the Christmas holidays of 1903, when he was a sixteen-year-old schoolboy and she just two years older. Upon her announcement by the butler, the doors were thrown open to a large gathering, and in walked "a vision so radiant that even now, after sixty-one years, my always moving, always fastidious, eye has never seen another vision to beat it."

The "beautiful Miss Hozier" was gratifyingly admired but Lady Blanche remained Clementine's harshest critic. For all her own wanton pleasure-seeking, she insisted her daughter return from balls by the impossibly early hour of midnight. When Clementine inevitably arrived home late, her mother would reprimand her in full view on her doorstep. On one occasion, Lady Blanche even boxed her ears, an assault so traumatic that Clementine ran without hat or coat the three miles to Mary Paget's house in Harley Street. The sympathetic Mrs. Paget went to reason with Lady Blanche before Clementine would agree to return home.

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A year after finishing school, during the summer season of 1904, Clementine attended a ball given by Lord and Lady Crewe at their home in Curzon Street. Among the guests in this Liberal household was Winston Churchill, now a rising young politician. Already a controversial figure, he was barred from most Conservative homes because earlier in the year he had defected from the party to join the Liberals over his opposition to tariff reform. (Winston was committed to the principle of free trade on the basis that it would keep food prices low, while the Conservative government was seeking to protect British industry with import duties.) Considered a renegade and class traitor by the Tories, he was viewed as pushy and puffed up even by admirers. His notorious adventures during the Second Boer War (the conflict doughtily defended by Clementine against her French classmates in Dieppe) and the insalubrious way in which his famous father, Lord Randolph, had died (reputedly from syphilis) lent him an air of raffish danger. A prolific author as well as a soldier and MP, he was already a celebrity.

Upon arriving at the ball, accompanied by his American mother, the voluptuous Jennie, Winston was arrested by the sight of a fawnlike girl alone in a doorway. He stood motionless, staring at her. He asked who she was and it transpired there were many connections between them: Jennie's brother-in-law, Sir Jack Leslie, was the girl's godfather and some years earlier Jennie herself had been a great friend of her mother. So Lady Randolph—whose supposed collection of two hundred lovers over her lifetime outnumbered even Lady Blanche's—introduced Winston to Clementine. The great wordsmith was struck dumb, not even managing the customary invitation to dance. Clementine assumed she had been introduced out of pity, and in any case did not care for what she had heard about this notorious publicity-seeker. He was, to boot, shorter than her and with his pale round face was not exactly handsome. Clementine signaled to a male friend, Charles Hoare, for rescue. He swept her away onto the dance floor, where he asked what she had been doing talking to "that frightful fellow Churchill."

It was an encounter that left no lasting impression on either of them. Winston had a habit of clamming up when first meeting beautiful women, as he had no capacity for small talk. He was also chauvinistically judgmental: he and his private secretary Eddie Marsh would habitually rank a woman on whether her face could launch "a thousand ships," merely two hundred, or perhaps just "a covered sampan, or small gunboat at most."21 Of course only an armada would do for him, so he had spent years chasing the "thousand ships" Pamela Plowden, daughter of the Resident of Hyderabad, Sir Trevor Chichele-Plowden. "Marry me," he had once declared, "and I will conquer the world and lay it at your feet."22 At other times, though, he was capable of "forgetting" to see or even write to her for months on end, and she detected something tellingly unphysical in his manner. In any case, his future was uncertain and his finances even more so, and Pamela Plowden was not a woman to gamble with her own comfort. Nor could she remain constant; after rejecting Winston's proposal in 1900 she married the less demanding Earl of Lytton and proceeded to take numerous lovers.

Winston, unlike so many other powerful men then or since, was not tremendously fired up by sex. For him, like the hero in his semiautobiographical novel Savrola, "ambition was the motive force and he was powerless to resist it."23 Pamela rightly understood that any wife would always take second place to his career and that, although viewing their beauty with semireligious awe, he could be brusquely dismissive of women's conversation. His belittling of Lucile, the heroine in his novel, with the line "Woman-like she asked three questions at once"24 is indicative of his general attitude.

Winston felt he ought to have a wife, however. In the running around 1906 was shipping heiress Muriel Wilson, another willowy beauty with expensive tastes. Once again the sexual spark was missing, and in any case she found politics boring and could not envisage sacrificing her life of pampered luxury to the inconveniences of public duty. Her firm rejection was humiliating.

Before that he had flirted with the American actress Ethel Barrymore, who had caused a sensation in London when, in 1902, she arrived in a low-cut bodice pinned with flowers. Winston took her to the Churchills' family seat, Blenheim Palace, and upon her return to America he bombarded her with political news from Britain. He proposed to her two years later but her lack of interest was made all too clear when she inadvertently praised one of his greatest parliamentary foes.

Earlier still he had visited the West End music halls, once launching a rousing tribute to the dancers at the Empire Promenade, who were then under attack from antivice campaigners. "In these somewhat unvirginal surroundings," he recalled later, "I made my maiden speech." The nature of his interest in the dancers is debatable. On one occasion he went home with a Gaiety girl, who when asked the next morning how it had gone, replied that Winston had done nothing but talk into the small hours "on the subject of himself."25 So, as he approached his midthirties, he was still to marry or, as the newspapers liked to point out, grow a mustache or hairs on his chest. The press began to label him with that undesirable tag "confirmed

bachelor."26

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One evening in March 1908, Clementine returned home tired after a day of teaching French to find a message from Lady St. Helier asking her to make up the numbers at a dinner the same evening. Clementine was reluctant: she had no suitable gown and was out of the requisite clean white gloves. But, under pressure from Lady Blanche, she eventually picked out a simple white satin princess dress and did her duty for her benefactress.

At 12 Bruton Street, Mayfair, Winston's faithful private secretary Eddie Marsh found him lingering in his bath. He was grumpy about the prospect of a dinner party that he fully expected to be a "bore." Marsh tactfully reminded him of Lady St. Helier's many kindnesses, and after more fuss eventually his boss rose from the bathwater to dress.

Clementine was already starting on the chicken course with the other guests by the time Winston arrived. Ruth Lee, the wealthy American who, with her British husband, Arthur, later donated their country house Chequers to the nation, wrote in her diary that Winston had taken the "vacant place on his hostess's left. He paid no attention to her, however, as he became suddenly and entirely absorbed in Miss Clementine Hozier, who sat on his other side, and paid her such marked and exclusive attention the whole evening that everyone was talking about it."27

Winston's fascination was piqued by one of the very necessities that, in Clementine's eyes, made her an outsider: never before had he met a fashionable young woman at a society dinner who earned her own living. Not only was this in itself to his mind worthy of respect but she was also ethereally lovely—another admirer had compared her to a "sweet almond-eyed gazelle." At twenty-two, she knew far more about life than the ladies of cosseting privilege he normally met, and she was well educated, sharing his love of France and its culture.

Through the influence of her aunts and her schooling, here was a woman who was actually interested in politics, if still unversed in its cut and thrust. She was receptive to new ideas, especially, it seemed, from him. For her, his gauche behavior at the ball four years previously had seemingly given way to a maturity and eagerness to please. She found his idealism and brilliance liberating.

After the ladies had left the table, Winston seemed exceptionally keen to finish his cigar and join them. He strode straight over to Clementine and monopolized her so obviously for the rest of the evening that the other women teased her when she finally left to fetch her coat. Years later, when asked whether she had found Winston handsome at that first meeting, she replied tactfully: "I thought he was very interesting."28 His one false move was an unfulfilled promise to send her a copy of his biography of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill: the omission "made a bad impression on me," noted Clementine later.

Thereafter he wasted little time. Within a couple of weeks he had invited Clementine and Lady Blanche to his mother's house, Salisbury Hall, near St. Albans, in Hertfordshire. There, Clementine had an early taste of political life when his promotion to the cabinet as president of the Board of Trade (at the precocious age of thirty-three) was announced during her stay. No doubt the excitement of being at the center of national events lingered in her thoughts as she embarked, soon after, on a long-standing trip to pick up Nellie from a tuberculosis clinic in the Black Forest and visit her grandmother in Florence.

Winston's first letter to her, on April 16, demonstrates a dramatic change in tone from his gushing notes to women such as Pamela. He wrote about how much he had enjoyed their discussions at Salisbury Hall, paying particular tribute to her cleverness. Here at last was a woman he could talk to rather than worship. "What a

comfort & pleasure it was to me to meet a girl with so much intellectual quality & such strong reserves of noble sentiment," he wrote, adding that he hoped they would lay the foundations of a "frank & clear-eyed friendship" with "many serious feelings of respect."29 Clementine fired off an equally telling letter to Jennie: "You were so kind to me that you make me feel as if I had known you always. I feel no-one can know him . . . without being dominated by his charm and brilliancy."

In those days it was customary for MPs elevated to the cabinet to stand for reelection. So while Clementine was in Germany, Winston began campaigning in his largely working-class seat in northwest Manchester. In one letter to her, he referred in glowing terms to the help given to him on the stump by the famously good-looking Lady Dorothy Howard. Why he thought it fitting to praise this other woman for fighting on his behalf in every slum, crowd and street "like Joan of Arc before Orleans" can only be imagined. As can Clementine's reaction to his observation that Dorothy was "a wonderful woman—tireless, fearless, convinced, inflexible—yet preserving all her womanliness." On April 23 she replied: "I feel so envious of Dorothy Howard—It must be very exciting to feel one has the power of influencing people . . . I feel as much excited as if I were a candidate."30

This expression of political interest—with its hint of jealous concern—must have greatly pleased Winston, who may have been testing Clementine for her reaction. In a quick crossfire of correspondence, on April 27 he added: "How I should have liked you to have been there. You would have enjoyed it I think." He exhibited, moreover, a new mood of measured self-revelation, not least when he wrote: "Write to me again. I am a solitary creature in the midst of crowds. Be kind to me." Here at last the rumbustious adventurer of popular folklore felt safe enough to admit that he was lonely. Indeed, in all the seventeen hundred letters and notes that Winston and Clementine would send to each other over the next fifty-seven years, isolation among people would prove the most persistent theme.

To the woman who had since Kitty's death felt unneeded, this was a clear signal that she might at last have found a new role to play. And despite his praise for Dorothy Howard, there was no reason for Clementine to regard her as a threat. Howard was too didactic on both women's suffrage and teetotalism—neither cause dear to Winston's heart—and he later referred to her as a "tyrant," if also "a dear." But he was at the same time something of a tease and liked to provoke Clementine to jealousy.

Her commitment was also tried when, for all Howard's efforts, on April 23 Winston lost the Manchester election. Now Clementine could see for herself the violent reactions he sometimes aroused. The Daily Telegraph, which had never forgiven him for abandoning the Tories for the Liberal Party, reported: "We have all been yearning for this to happen . . . Winston Churchill is out, Out, OUT." She could not help but admire, however, the way he picked himself up from this defeat before winning another election in Dundee the following month. She was now avidly reading the newspapers to monitor his every move.

Unusually self-sufficient, Clementine did not tell even close friends about her feelings, but she was convinced that she was in love. She saw Winston again several times in June and July but never alone. At times she would refuse his invitations, simply to avoid gossip, although she did agree to meet him at Salisbury Hall again in August. In the meantime, she was horrified to discover that a serious fire had broken out at a house where she knew him to be staying. Relieved to read in the Times that no one had been injured, she rushed to the post office to wire her joy to him.

Winston took this as a sign and persuaded his cousin Sunny, the Duke of Marlborough, to invite her to Blenheim. She demurred—not least because she was down to her very last clean dress. But Winston was insistent, promising that his mother and Sunny would look after her. "[Sunny] is quite different from me, understanding women thoroughly, getting into touch with them at once," he wrote rather naively. "Whereas I am stupid and clumsy in that relation . . . Yet by such vy different paths we both arrive at loneliness!"31

Clementine could refuse no longer. On August 10 she left the Isle of Wight, where she had been staying, and took the train to Blenheim. As she traveled through the English countryside, she wrote in shaky handwriting to Lady Blanche back in London: “I feel dreadfully shy & rather tired . . . I . . . can do nothing more intelligent than count the telegraph posts as they flash by.” Soon afterward she was walking up the front steps into the gloom of Blenheim’s great hall. There to greet her, below the muscular victory arch, were Winston; Jennie; the Duke; Winston’s great friend F. E. Smith and his wife, Margaret; plus a private secretary from the Board of Trade. It was clear this was to be no low-key visit.

Alone in her high-ceilinged bedroom, she found a fire in the grate despite the August heat—an extravagance that no doubt offended her frugal nature. She looked in dismay at the bathtub, the hot and cold water jugs, the towels and sponges, knowing she had no way of dressing to the standards that her hosts would expect. Her spirits were lifted only when there was a knock at the door; noticing her unusual lack of a lady’s maid, Jennie had discreetly sent her own. Yet despite this act of kindness, Clementine failed to sparkle at dinner, feeling impossibly shy in that cavernous Blenheim saloon with its forbidding military frescoes. Winston talked so much that perhaps he never noticed. He did, however, promise to show her the famous rose gardens overlooking the lake the following morning.

Punctual as ever, Clementine descended to breakfast at the appointed hour only to be left waiting and waiting. Fearing that she would flounce out at any moment, Sunny hastily invited her for a drive around the estate while he sent word of the emerging crisis up to Winston—who was still slumbering in his bed. The walk was hastily rearranged for the afternoon, when finally Winston escorted Clementine to the gardens. They strolled down the hill, following the twists and turns in the path through the cedars and oaks planted for suspense and drama by the great landscape architect Capability Brown. They toured the rose garden, only some of its flowers drooping from the heat, and admired the glimpses of the great lake through the leaves. Yet by the time they began to make their way back up to the house, still nothing of much import had been said.

Finally, a summer shower drove the couple to take shelter in a little Greek temple folly, but there was by now a certain tension between them. Clementine spotted a spider scuttling across the floor, and with steely determination quietly decided that if Winston had not declared himself before it reached a crack in the flagstones she would leave regardless.32 Happily, just in time, Winston asked at last if she would marry him. Without any further unnecessary hesitation she agreed, on condition that he promise to keep their betrothal secret until she had asked for her mother’s consent. But as they were leaving the temple, a seemingly intensely relieved Winston spotted Sunny and could not help himself, shouting: “We’re getting married! We’re getting married!” Despite this minor betrayal, she later sent him a note via the footman: “My dearest One, I love you with all my heart and trust you absolutely.”33

The next day Clementine left Blenheim with a letter from Winston to her mother, asking for Lady Blanche’s permission to marry her daughter and promising to give his prospective bride a “station” in life worthy of “her beauty and virtues.” He could not bear to wait for the answer, though, and at the last moment jumped on the London-bound train beside her.

Lady Blanche considered Winston just right for her unusual offspring. He did not have the fortune she would have liked, but he was brilliant and ambitious and could earn his own living—and at least he was marrying for romance rather than money. In an approving letter to her sister-in-law, she said: “I do not know which of the two is the more in love.”34 Soon afterward Winston wrote to Clementine, “[There are] no words to convey to you the feelings of love & joy by wh my being is possessed. May God who has given to me so much more than I ever knew how to ask keep you safe & sound.”35 Clementine responded gleefully: “I feel there is no room for anyone but you in my heart—you fill every corner.”36

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News of the engagement drew mixed reactions. In Dieppe, Madame Villain ran through the streets crying out the news in delight. The chattering classes in London took a more negative view of the marriage's prospects, deciding that Clementine would either be crushed or prove insufficiently malleable. Her grandmother predicted that the woman she'd known as such a fearful child would obediently "follow" Winston and "say little."37 Lord Rosebery, the former prime minister, forecast the pair would last six months, because Winston was "not the marrying kind."38

Clementine told people that she was under no illusions that being married to Winston Churchill would be easy but she did think it "would be tremendously stimulating." She was also excited about her ring—"a fat ruby with two diamonds," she boasted to Nellie. But somehow, now that she was engaged she was more reticent with him, writing: "Je t'aime passionément—I feel less shy in French." It appears her reserve worried Winston; he wrote to F. E. Smith: "Is it fair to ask this lovely creature to marry so ambitious a man as myself?"39

Even so, he would not brook a long engagement. A date was fixed for the wedding at St. Margaret's, Westminster, for a month's time. Clementine wanted everything to be perfect, but as the days flew by with so much to be done she felt herself sinking. The newspapers were now following her every step. She was young, beautiful and marrying a celebrity; she was news, with all the personal invasion that entails. Photographs of her face were everywhere. The Daily Mail took a particular interest in a dress fitting that lasted, by its calculations, six hours. By contrast, Winston—tied up with his politics as ever—was rarely to be seen. There were moments when she began to falter, but her brother, Bill, steadied her. He reminded her that she had already broken off at least two engagements and that she could not humiliate a public figure like Winston Churchill.

There was a reason other than nerves for her wobble. Shortly after their engagement, Winston had embarked on an eleven-hundred-mile round trip to a Scottish castle on a rocky promontory north of Aberdeen, where another beautiful young woman was waiting for him. Over the past year he had become close friends with Violet, the slender-waisted twenty-one-year-old daughter of his relatively new boss, the Liberal prime minister Herbert Henry Asquith. Although spoiled and immersed in a life of almost royal luxury, Violet had a brilliant mind—in her stepmother Margot's view "alas too brilliant"—and found most men her age dull. She held Winston, however, in the "high esteem he held himself." In fact, they were remarkably alike—opinionated, garrulous, idealistic, willful and pugnacious. Both, moreover, loved and lived politics. She met him at balls and dinners, or when he came to visit her father; soon she was clearing her diary to see him all the more. Later Violet would insist they had always been just friends, but all the signs are that she was deeply in love. She declared herself "inebriated" by the way he talked and "enthralled" by his genius. Unfortunately, Winston was not in search of a female version of himself.

Upon learning of the engagement on August 14, Violet had reputedly fainted and then written a venomous letter to Clementine's cousin Venetia Stanley, who was to be a bridesmaid at the wedding. Winston's new fiancée, said Violet, was as "stupid as an owl," no more than "ornamental," and incapable of being "the critical reformatory wife" Winston badly needed in his career to "hold him back from blunders." Venetia replied by noting that the Manchester Guardian had (generously) included in a list of Clementine's accomplishments six languages, music and brilliant conversation, adding, "I think he must be a good deal in love with her to face such a mother in law."40 Even so, Violet's stepmother, Margot, remained convinced that Clementine had no brains, character or strength and was in fact "mad," whereas Violet's patronizing view was that she was "sane to the point of dreariness." Asquith himself predicted merely that the match would be a "disaster."

Clementine later admitted to finding such a reception as Winston's new fiancée "petrifying" and had instinctively opposed his decision to go ahead with his long-planned visit to Violet's holiday retreat—where Miss Asquith was caustically remarking that at least the engagement would provide "the Hozier" with a rest "from making her own clothes." Winston fatefully concluded it was still his duty to make his peace with the other woman who loved him, and once there, he and Violet went for romantic cliff-top hikes—but their time together soured when she slipped and cut her face, leaving her miserable and, in her own words, looking "worse than the vampire in Jane Eyre."41 By the time he left a few days later, she was almost hysterical.

Although the Asquiths were invited to the wedding, they did not come. Not that Violet had done with Winston; far from it. But Clementine would soon discover that she had more than one rival on her hands for his attentions.

CHAPTER TWO

More Than Meets the Eye

1908–14

Waking up at dawn on her wedding day in a large, chilly room at Lady St. Helier's mansion did nothing to boost Clementine's spirits. Exiled by her mother from her own home to make room for guests, she was cut off in Portland Place from the bustle of family life. She longed to return, even if only for breakfast, for one last taste of the familiar before taking the leap into the unknown as Mrs. Winston Churchill.

Alas, a maid had taken away her day clothes, leaving her nothing to wear but her wedding dress. Feeling trapped, Clementine crept down the majestic staircase in her dressing gown while the house was still in shuttered darkness and Lady St. Helier asleep. The only soul about was a young under-housemaid blacking the grate in the morning room. Seeing a friendly girl of similar age, if not prospects, Clementine unburdened herself of her troubles. The good-hearted servant quickly abandoned her work to scurry upstairs to her attic.

Minutes later, a figure slipped out of a back door in the classic uniform of an off-duty maid. Wearing a dark, close-fitting cheap coat over a pretty print dress and black-buttoned boots, she hopped on a bus west to Kensington. A conductor, recognizing his famous passenger from the newspapers, suggested Clementine must have made a mistake. London was abuzz with the excitement of an aristocratic beauty marrying a global celebrity. Crowds of the scale normally seen only at a royal wedding were already beginning to take up their positions on the streets. But now here was the bride riding a bus away from where the ceremony was due to take place.

Nothing would deter her from returning to Abingdon Villas, however, and she arrived to astonished gasps, not only at her presence but also her unexpected attire. A merry time with Nellie and Bill restored her resolve and she soon headed back (by horse-drawn brougham this time) to prepare for the two p.m. service at St. Margaret's in Parliament Square.

It was September 12, 1908, and many grandees were still away on holiday, including half the cabinet, who had sent their regrets. Among the thirteen hundred guests who did turn up to Parliament's parish church were David Lloyd George, the Liberal chancellor of the Exchequer; F. E. Smith, one of the few Tories who had forgiven Winston's defection to the Liberals; and General Sir Ian Hamilton from his army days.

A number of places on the bride's side—it was anyone's guess exactly how many—were occupied by her mother's former admirers. Some were mischievously placed together, such as the gossipy poet Wilfrid

Scawen Blunt and the Scottish peer Hugo Charteris, but significantly it was Bertie Mitford who sat in the front row beside Lady Blanche, who was resplendent in a purple silk gown trimmed with white fur. On the groom's side of course was Winston's mother, Jennie, competitively dolled up in beaver-colored satin and a hat decorated with dahlias. A fading beauty of fifty-four, she was now married to a man a mere fortnight older than Winston by the name of George Cornwallis-West.

The bells of Big Ben struck two o'clock, and four minutes later Clementine entered the fifteenth-century white-stone church on the arm of her handsome brother, Bill, now an officer in the Royal Navy. She walked down the aisle framed by rows of soaring white Gothic arches, bathed in the autumn sun streaming through the windows. Draped in shimmering white satin, a veil of tulle clipped to her hair by a coronet of fresh orange blossom, she wore diamond earrings from Winston and clutched a bouquet of fragrant white tuberoses and a white parchment prayer book. Behind Clementine were five bridesmaids—Nellie, cousins Venetia Stanley and Madeline Whyte, Winston's cousin Clare Frewen and a friend, Horatia Seymour. All wore amber-colored satin gowns and carried bunches of pink roses. More roses and camellias tumbled across their large black satin hats.

The choir sang "Lead us, Heavenly Father" while members of the congregation climbed on their seats for a better look. Many thought Winston fell short as the dashing groom in the presence of such elegance, and flanked by his dapper best man, the mustached Lord Hugh Cecil. He was losing hair and gaining weight, his face "settling into the attitude of pugnacity it was to become famous for."1 Tailor and Cutter magazine branded his morning suit "one of the greatest failures as a wedding garment we have ever seen," claiming that it lent him the appearance of a "glorified coachman." When Clementine reached this unprepossessing figure before the altar, he somewhat bizarrely held out his hand and warmly shook hers.

Dean Welldon, who had been Winston's headmaster at Harrow, proceeded to sum up what was now expected of the bride. A statesman, he declared, should be able to depend "upon the love, the insight, the penetrating sympathy and devotion of his wife." Her role, and the influence she would exercise in her husband's future public life, was so important as to be "sacred." Winston's vows after this portentous address were loud and clear, hers so soft as to be barely audible. The whole ceremony was a rehearsal for her future; when signing the register, Winston deserted her for an animated political discussion with Lloyd George.

When the married couple finally emerged from the church, mounted policemen held back the cheering throngs along the route to the reception back at Portland Place. There, guests were treated to a display of the wedding gifts: twenty-five silver candelabra and a large collection of wine coasters, pepper pots and silver inkstands paraded alongside a gold-topped walking stick sent by King Edward VII, and £500 in cash from the fatherly figure of German-born financier Sir Ernest Cassel. Clementine's aunt Maisie had given her a chain set with "myriads" of sapphires, opals, amethysts and topazes, Winston's aunt Cornelia a diamond necklace. Alongside these treasures were a fresh turbot with a lemon stuffed in its mouth—a gift from Madame Villain of Dieppe—and a manual entitled House Books on 12/- a Week.

The crowds had been won over by Clementine's grace and beauty, and so had the press. In one of the next day's papers a cartoon of a grinning Winston holding a stocking appeared over the caption: "Winston's latest Line—Hoziery." "Undoubtedly," proclaimed the Times, the event had "captured the public imagination." The Daily Mirror hailed it as "the Wedding of the Year."

They spent their first evening as husband and wife at Blenheim—the palace having been tactfully vacated by Sunny, the duke. It can only be guessed who was the more nervous. Both were almost certainly virgins and at nearly thirty-four, Winston's manly pride was at stake. He had been worried enough beforehand to seek advice from an expert—his mother. By the time they left Blenheim a couple of days later for Baveno on

Italy's Lake Maggiore, it appears the young couple had got the hang of things. On September 20, Winston was able to report to Jennie that they had "loitered & loved,"2 and with surprising candor he described sex to his mother-in-law as "a serious and delightful occupation." Perhaps Winston applied the same energy and attention to the details of lovemaking as he did his other "occupations." Within a month of their return from their honeymoon Clementine was pregnant.

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While the newlyweds were busy loving in Italy, Clementine's cousin Venetia had traveled to Slains Castle to stay with Violet Asquith. A week after the wedding, Venetia burst into the dining room to announce that she could not find her friend, who had last been seen at dusk, book in hand, on a cliff-top path. Guests, servants and villagers were summoned to search the sharp rocks at the foot of the sixty-foot drop, shouting, "Violet!" into the moonless mist as the sea crashed angrily about them. It was treacherous work lit only by lanterns and toward midnight hopes started to fade. Her father sobbed into his wife Margot's arms. She started to pray.

Shortly thereafter, cheers went up from some fishermen: Violet had finally been found unhurt on soft grass near the house and was already regaling her rescuers with thrilling tales of having slipped on the rocks and knocked herself unconscious. News got out and reporters quickly descended on the castle, demanding photographs and interviews. Sensational headlines such as MISS ASQUITH'S PERIL and HOUSE PARTY'S THRILLING SEARCH followed, but Violet's eagerness to oblige the press led Margot to suspect that the "accident" might not have been altogether accidental. Doctors could find no evidence of a blow to the head and the more Margot tried to avoid publicity, the more thrillingly near-fatal Violet's story became. Some even began to speculate that Violet had attempted suicide, although it seems almost certain that she had merely intended "to cause [Winston] a pang."3 Either way, Violet was becoming a specter at Clementine's feast.

Margot removed Violet and the family from the eerie atmosphere at Slains, a vast, ancient and reputedly haunted castle perched on the edge of a desolate headland, but for some time after the so-called Rock Affair her stepdaughter continued to show signs of "almost hysterical"4 behavior. Violet's father, the prime minister, feared more unhelpful attention and had to intervene personally to stop her racing off to meet Winston when he arrived back in Britain. With time, her mood calmed, and she finally returned to London. But Winston was still concerned, and in November he arranged for her to have lunch with him and his new wife. Violet behaved well, but the conversation was no doubt strained and the newly pregnant Clementine would not have been in her best form. Winston's decision to catch a cab alone with his guest afterward appears thoughtless, but according to Violet's account he was eager to impress upon her that Clementine "had more in her than met the eye." With what Violet herself described as "cloying" self-restraint she responded: "But so much meets the eye."5

Though mostly sensed rather than heard, the continuing criticism from such quarters was wreaking havoc on Clementine's fragile confidence. Violet and her family were at the center of a snobbish circle of brilliant intellectuals with immense power and privilege. Her bosom pal Venetia, Clementine's super-confident Stanley cousin, could finish the Times crossword without needing to write in a single letter. By contrast Violet thought Clementine "very nervous & excited in public" and prone to "beginning her sentences over & over again & constantly interrupting herself." Her eyes, reputedly her best feature, were actually "tired & pink." But Violet also noted that her figure was "Divine" and (rather condescendingly) that the content of her conversation was beginning to improve. Clementine, meanwhile, understandably enjoyed it when others turned a critical eye on Violet—although she would wisely refrain from joining in. She knew the esteem in which Winston held her rival and could not help but be jealous. The sentiment was mutual.

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Clementine's pregnancy made Winston's bachelor apartment in Bolton Street impracticable. Although fitted with electric lighting, it was tall and narrow with endless flights of stairs. Every surface—even in the bathroom—was covered with model soldiers, polo team photographs, tiny silver cannon or books. This was no place for Clementine to make her first real home, and by the time she returned from her honeymoon, it was even less so. Jennie had given her bedroom a surprise Edwardian makeover, dressing it with sateen bows for the full boudoir effect. A natural minimalist, Clementine could barely conceal her horror; she now considered her mother-in-law a "trial."6

For her part, Jennie had welcomed Winston's choice of bride but this marked the beginning of a fraught relationship between the two women. Clementine saw how Winston adored his mother despite her faults. She had seemed a "fairy princess" to him as a child, and later he had harbored somewhat Oedipal feelings for her. Aged twenty he had written in a letter: "How I wish I could secrete myself in the corner of the envelope and embrace you as soon as you tear it open."7 Even now Winston often chose to walk arm in arm with his mother, leaving Clementine feeling like an intruder.

In recent years Jennie had marshaled her formidable intellect, contacts and womanly charms (although some argued not her critical faculties) to advance Winston's career. Having pioneered the role first of active political wife and then mother, Jennie was a hard act for Clementine to beat. A flashing-eyed voluptuous beauty—once described as "more panther than woman"—and one of the first American heiresses to marry into the British aristocracy, Jennie had many male admirers, including the king, but the bed-hopping that had lately benefited her son offended Clementine's rigid moral code, as did her marriage to the young and impecunious George Cornwallis-West, which she viewed as "vain and frivolous." (Cornwallis-West was in fact pursuing a flamboyant affair with the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell and the marriage ended as widely expected in 1914. Jennie cited his refusal to grant her conjugal rights as grounds for divorce and became dependent on her sons for support.)

When that marriage broke down, Clementine, according to her daughter Mary, "resented the way [Jennie] leant so heavily on her elder son . . . They never had a classic falling out. It's just that [Clementine] never joined in the chorus of praise for her mother-in-law."8 She also railed at Jennie's extravagance. Winston's mother, a friend explained, was a woman for whom "life didn't begin on a basis of less than forty pairs of shoes."

Clementine blamed Jennie for Winston's own excesses and was appalled to discover how she and her late first husband, Lord Randolph, had neglected their eldest son throughout his childhood. His mother, she felt, had only "discovered" Winston when he became "famous," after his father's death. While at school he had sent Jennie letter after letter pleading with her in vain to visit him, the crosses for his kisses so numerous they would fall off the page. At fourteen, Winston was still writing, "I long to see you my mummy," but Jennie considered him too "ugly," "slouchy and tiresome"9 to bother with. Her selfishness and his lack of a settled home life made him feel "destitute."10 For both Winston and Clementine a steady, loving childhood had been unknown.

Clementine could also empathize with Winston's pain at his father's obvious preference for his younger, less troublesome brother, Jack. Lord Randolph barely spoke to Winston unless to deliver a rebuke; some historians go so far as to suggest his father actively loathed his son. Winston was a disappointment to him: the poor results he achieved on his entrance exam consigned him to the bottom class at Harrow and he was considered not to have the brains for the bar, let alone Oxford, although the more enlightened teachers recognized that he had unusual gifts. Even by upper-class Victorian standards their parental neglect was unusual. Friends and relations would urge them to "make more" of Winston; one kindly soul, Laura, Countess of Wilton, even wrote to him as self-appointed "deputy mother," sending him money and food. Jennie failed even to remember her sons' birthdays.

As children both Winston and Clementine had relied on middle-aged women outside the family for emotional sustenance, in his case none more so than his nanny Mrs. Everest, whose unconditional love was the only thing that made him feel safe. It was she who had ensured Winston was extracted from a prep school where the sadistic headmaster repeatedly flogged him. Mrs. Everest had also tried to rein in his spending and instructed him to be a "kind" gentleman. He loved her gratefully, but his upbringing nonetheless left him selfish and "emotionally insatiable."11

A sickly youngster with a lisp and weak chest, Winston had been bullied at school—at seven he had on one occasion been pelted with cricket balls. Clementine had also been taunted in her early years by more rumbustious children and both had eventually developed strategies for self-protection—in his case naughtiness, in hers reserve—to hide their insecurities from public view. But neither had lost an instinctive sympathy for the underdog.

They both also knew what it was to lose a father and to endure a mother's "frantic sexual intrigue." Just as there were stories that she was not Hozier's child, it was rumored that Winston had been conceived before marriage. Witnessing Lord Randolph's public decline from young political titan to raging invalid had been a further agony for his son. Only twenty when his father died a grotesque death reputedly from syphilis in 1895, Winston never established a connection with him and always felt in his shadow. The penetrating screams of Lord Randolph's last days may have contributed to his own rejection of casual sex.

Thus Winston, like Clementine, craved comfort and protection. Marriage allowed him to recapture that sense of security he had felt in Mrs. Everest's nursery, to be folded at long last within a woman's comforting embrace. Since his Victorian upbringing deterred him from talking about sex in an adult way, he adopted baby talk instead. He began addressing Clementine as "Puss Cat" or "Kat," while he became "My Sweet Amber Dog" or "Pug," and there was much mention of lapping cream and stroking warm, furry coats. Respectable women were in any case at this period presumed to be unburdened by libido, and Winston had a particular dislike for overt sexual predators.

Nor, again like Clementine, did he form close friendships easily. Precocious and bumptious, he had been unpopular with his peers as a child, probably not helped by the fact that his contacts outside the immediate family before he went to school were primarily with servants. When he twice failed to get into the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, the elite training academy for British Army officers, the specialist tutorial college he was sent to observed, "[T]he boy has many good points but what he wants is very firm handling."12

These were, then, two insecure people with much in common. One crucial difference was that Winston had spent much of his childhood at Blenheim Palace, while Clementine knew what it was like to live in cheap lodgings. He had always had servants and had never drawn his own bath or traveled on a bus. Just because he was now married and—as the son of a younger son in an aristocracy run on primogeniture—far from rich, he saw no reason for this to change. Clementine, a former habitué of the Dieppe fish markets, was terrified of spending money they did not have in an effort to live up to his exacting requirements.

In early 1909, they bought a lease on 33 Eccleston Square, a cream stucco house in semifashionable Pimlico. This was to be their first family home and Clementine was finally able to decorate in her own simple style, although she let herself go in her bedroom, where she appliquéd an Art Nouveau design of a large fruit tree in "shades of orange, brown and green."13 She never experimented so flamboyantly again, which is arguably just as well. A later tenant, the foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey, showed the mural to the French ambassador, who was reportedly struck with "horror." (But Grey also wrote to her saying Eccleston Square was the "nicest" house he had ever had in London and that it gave the "impression of belonging to nice people.")14

Clementine insisted on having her own bedroom from an early stage. Indeed, after Bolton Street the couple would not share a bed at home again. They kept different hours, she preferring to rise early and he to retire late. And it was not just the Sandhurst college that recognized he needed “very firm handling.” Winston was quickly made to observe the “protocol of the bedchamber”: Clementine needed refuge from her husband’s “dominating brilliance,” so he was allowed entry to her room by invitation only, thus placing him in the position of supplicant, always hoping to “kiss her dear lips” and “end up snugly” in her arms. Occasionally, upon turning in, she would leave a note indicating that he might be in luck that evening. But he could never bank on it.15

Winston was not the only member of the family who needed “handling.” Jennie showed no signs of retreating gracefully, grabbing the chance to decorate her son’s new bedroom and insisting on choosing the color for the front door. As Clementine’s pregnancy progressed and she went to rest in the country, however, Winston chose to defer more frequently to his wife. He dutifully reported on marble basins, bookcases, paints and progress in chasing up the builders. He commended her on her thrift, which saw old carpets being reused despite the odd stain and shabby edges, while cheap linoleum was put down in the servants’ rooms.

Clementine was seven months into her pregnancy before they were finally able to move in. She passed some of the time at Blenheim with Goonie, the wife of Winston’s brother, Jack, who was also expecting, and the two struck up a mutually supportive friendship, but she could not shake off her fears about the birth. Goonie—whose real name was Gwendoline—had her baby first and Winston used her “smooth and successful” delivery of a healthy boy to reassure Clementine. He insisted she had suffered little but was himself still nervous about the impending event: “I don’t like your having to bear pain & face this ordeal. But . . . out of pain joy will spring.”16

Not that his concern prevented him from leaving her on her own to pursue politics and steep himself in male society. At the end of May he went to Blenheim for the annual camp of the Queen’s Own Oxfordshire Hussars, of which he was an officer. He greatly enjoyed it but Clementine could not face a large house party. In those days expectant mothers were rarely seen and their condition barely alluded to (most thought the word pregnancy suitable only for medical books). So on June 1, just shy of a month before she was due to deliver, she went to stay in relative seclusion with Lady St. Helier’s daughter in Buckinghamshire. At this point Clementine’s old tremulous self returned to the fore. On her way she stopped for lunch at what looked like a “respectable” commercial travelers’ hotel in Slough, only to be “terrified” when she found it “infested by several dirty men.”17 On another occasion she locked herself in a train lavatory for fear of cutthroats climbing through a carriage window.

Although anxious about her well-being, Winston was unwilling to change his ways. Their frequent separations—a pattern that would last throughout their marriage—threw them into stark contrast with other political couples of the time. (Stanley Baldwin and his wife, Lucy, spent only one night apart in their entire life together.) These periods apart gave rise to some seventeen hundred letters, telegrams and notes between them that survive today, and a habit of putting their thoughts to paper that persisted even when they were under the same roof.

Diana Churchill was born at home on July 11, and although it was not yet customary for fathers to attend the actual birth, Winston was at least nearby. Even now, however, Violet remained in his thoughts; he wrote to her three days later claiming (unconvincingly) that Clementine had invited her to “come back again to see the baby.” “After four almost any afternoon Miss Churchill receives,”18 he wrote proudly from his desk at the Board of Trade.

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Really enjoyed this book as it was a great history of Britain as well as an intimate look at both Churchills, their family and friends as well as some of the great leaders of their day - Roosevelt, Stalin, Clement Atlee, Averell Harriman -- it certainly knocked these people off their pedestals and gave us a look at all the skeletons in their closets.
Rather than pick on details, I tended to look at the broad picture and thoroughly enjoyed this well-written biography which was well written and gripping in many ways. To be that gripped by a book when the ending is already well known says a lot for the writing. I found myself rooting for Clementine and occasionally wishing someone would have given Winston a good boot in the butt for not appreciating all she did for him, risking her health and subverting her own interesting personality to cater to his needs.

Most people idolized Churchill and his accomplishments, and indeed, I wonder if any other politician could have saved the world from Hitler. However, this book makes it very clear that without his 'Clemmie' behind him, Winston most likely would never have succeeded. Not terribly maternal with her children, Clementine nevertheless put up with her gigantic child-like, spoiled and demanding husband, catering to his every whim and studying not only the politics but the personalities behind them in order to guide him in making intelligent decisions. Unknown to most, she became the iron hand in the velvet glove and eventually won the admiration and respect of many world leaders. She did not have an easy life, constantly fearing they could not afford his extravagant demands and habits and often living hand-to-mouth on the charity of friends.
Although we all know the outcome of the war, few of us might know the great part Winston CHurchill's wife Clementine played in it.

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Review
“Engrossing. . . . Purnell’s book is the first formal biography of a woman who has heretofore been relegated to the sidelines.”
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"Winston Churchill kept nothing from Clementine. "You know,"he informed FDR, "I tell Clemmie everything." Purnell has delivered an astute, pacey account of a woman who hardly ever emerged from the shadows. It is a sharp analysis of what it meant to be a politician's wife. . . [and] shows how much we can learn about Winston Churchill from his wife and marriage."
–The Wall Street Journal

“Thorough and engaging. . . Purnell’s extensive and insightful biography offers a much welcome portrait of Clementine Churchill, a woman whose remarkable life has long been overshadowed by her famous husband.”
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"Until this biography, Clementine’s influence had been completely overlooked and undervalued by Winston's biographers. Clementine was a complicated, mercurial figure, and Purnell does a wonderful job painting a full picture of a woman who was an excellent wife, a mediocre at best mother, and privy to some of the most profound moments of the modern era.
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“Fascinating… [Purnell's] book may leave you thinking Clementine is one of the most underrated, complex women in British history.”
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“This exemplary biography illustrates how Clementine’s intelligence, hard work, and perseverance in often difficult circumstances made her every bit a match for her remarkable, intimidating husband, and a fascinating figure in her own right.”
—Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)

“The extensive research shines a deserved spotlight on Britain’s first lady through wartime and beyond."
—Fort Worth Star-Telegram

“Purnell does a remarkable job of proving that Clementine had a large impact on Winston’s life. . . He seems to have known immediately upon meeting her that she would be the one who could support his great ambitions and moderate his mood swings and gambling. . . She edited his writing, advised him on political decisions, and volunteered in many ways throughout both world wars. Her significance, in many way, can be compared to that of Eleanor Roosevelt.”
--Library Journal

“Sonia Purnell has restored Clementine Churchill to her rightful place in history. Behind every great man there is a great woman–and this was especially true of Winston Churchill.Clementine is a fascinating portrait of a highly complex woman who only ever showed a brave and elegant face to the world. At last, thanks to Sonia Purnell’s excellent book, we see her true nature.
–Amanda Foreman, author of A World on Fire

“At last Sonia Purnell has given us the first political biography of Clementine Churchill, a woman of power and progressive vision. Although she was her husband's best guide and most astute advisor during the worst of times, her essential role is generally unacknowledged. Boldly written and illuminating, this is a generative restoration of a fascinating woman who transcended family grief and marital agonies to lead her husband and the nation with grace, commitment and persistence.”
–Blanche Wiesen Cook, author of Eleanor Roosevelt

“An acute and sympathetic biography which brings Clementine Churchill out of the shade into which her illustrious and domineering husband has cast her and shows how key she was to his success. Sonia Purnell makes us ask how Clementine endured life with Winston, and provides the answers.”
–Margaret MacMillan, author of Paris 1919 and The War that Ended Peace

"In this wonderful book Sonia Purnell has at long last given Clementine Churchill the biography she deserves. Sensitive yet clear-eyed, Clementine tells the fascinating story of a complex woman struggling to maintain her own identity while serving as the conscience and principal adviser to one of the most important figures in history. Purnell succeeds brilliantly at an almost impossible task: providing fresh and thought-provoking insights into Winston Churchill in the course of examining his complicated marriage. I was enthralled all the way through."
–Lynn Olson, bestselling author of Citizens of London and Those Angry Days

“An excellent book…Both scrupulous and fair-minded, Sonia Purnell has done her subject proud in this eye-opening and engrossing account of the strong-willed and ambitious woman without whom Winston Churchill’s political career would have been a washout.”
–Miranda Seymour, The Telegraph

“It seems extraordinary that no one has given this remarkable woman proper biographical treatment before. . . . She sacrificed her children and her health in the greater service of her husband, but she also kept him buoyant. This book is a salutary reminder that the Churchills were always a team.”
–The Times (UK)

“Compellingly readable. . . Sonia Purnell’s biography of Winston’s wife Clementine brings her out from behind the shadow cast by the Great Man. She became her husband’s wise counselor, discreetly offering sound advice, re-writing his speeches, toning down his foolish or angry letters, preventing him from making certain terrible political mistakes. . . Her wheeling and dealing was done behind a veil of gracious femininity.”
–The Independent (UK)

“Eye-opening. . . A bold biography of a bold woman; at last Purnell has put Clementine Churchill at the center of her own extraordinary story, rather than in the shadow of her husband’s.”
–Mail on Sunday (UK)

“In our own era of sturdy individualism, it is remarkable to read of Clementine’s resolve to subordinate her own desires and her children’s happiness to her husband’s cause. . . An intriguing study of a character both deeply flawed and, in her way, magnificent.”
–The Evening Standard (UK)

About the Author
Sonia Purnell is a biographer and journalist who has worked at The Economist, The Telegraph, and Sunday Times. Her first book, Just Boris, a candid portrait of London mayor and Brexit champion Boris Johnson, was longlisted for the Orwell prize. Clementine, published as First Lady:The Life and Wars of Clementine Churchill in the UK, was chosen as a Book of the Year by The Telegraph and Independent and was shortlisted for the Plutarch Award. Residence: London, UK Social: Twitter: SoniaPurnell

Introduction

Late in the evening of Monday, June 5, 1944, Clementine Churchill walked past the Royal Marine guards into the Downing Street Map Room wearing an elegant silk housecoat over her nightdress. Still fully made up, she looked immaculate and, as always, serene. Around her the atmosphere was palpably tense, even frayed. She glanced at the team of grave-faced “plotters” busily tracking troops, trucks and ships on their charts. Then she cast her eyes over the long central table, whose phones never stopped ringing, to the far corner, where, as expected, she spotted her husband, shoulders hunched, face cast in agonized brooding. She went to him as she knew she must, for no one else—no aide, no general, no friend, however loyal—could help him now.

Clementine Churchill was one of a tiny group privy to the months of top secret preparations for the next morning's monumental endeavor. Fully apprised of the risks involved in what would be the largest seaborne invasion in history, she knew the unthinkable price of failure: millions of people and a vast swath of Europe would remain under Nazi tyranny, their hopes of salvation dashed. She also knew the ghosts that haunted Winston that night, the thousands of men he had sent to their deaths in the Dardanelles campaign of the First World War. She alone had sustained him through that disaster and the horrors of his time serving in the trenches on the Western Front.

Churchill had delayed the D-day operation for as long as he could to ensure the greatest chance of success, but now British, American and Canadian troops would in a few hours attempt to take a heavily fortified coastline defended by men who were widely regarded as the world's best soldiers. Huge convoys were already moving through the darkness toward their battle stations off the coast of Normandy. Earlier that evening, Winston and Clementine had discussed the prospects of the gambit's success, at length and alone, over a candlelit dinner. No doubt he had poured out his fears and she had sought, as so many times before, to stiffen his resolve. In the end, the command to proceed had been given.

Looking up now as she approached, Winston turned to his wife and said, "Do you realise that by the time you wake up in the morning twenty thousand men may have been killed?"1

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To the outside world Winston Churchill showed neither doubt nor weakness. Since he had declared to the world in June 1940 that Britain would "never surrender," his was the voice of defiance, strength and valor. Even Stalin, one of his fiercest critics, was to concede that he could think of no other instance in history when the future of the world had so depended on the courage of a single man.2 What enabled this extraordinary figure to stand up to Hitler when others all around him were crumbling? How did he find in himself the strength to command men to go to their certain deaths? How could an ailing heavy drinker and cigar smoker well into his sixties manage to carry such a burden for five long years, cementing an unlikely coalition of allies that not only saved Britain but ultimately defeated the Axis powers?

Churchill's conviction, his doctor Lord Moran observed while tending him through the war, began "in his own bedroom." This national savior and global legend was in some ways a man like any other. He was not an emotional island devoid of need, as so many historians have depicted him. His resolve drew on someone else's. In fact, Winston's upbringing and temperament made him almost vampiric in his hunger for the love and energy of others. Violet Asquith, who adored him all her life, noted that he was "armed to the teeth for life's encounter" but "also strangely vulnerable" and in want of "protection."3

Only one person was able and willing to provide that "protection" whatever the challenge, as she showed on that critical June night in 1944. Yet Clementine's role as Winston's wife, closest adviser and greatest influence was overlooked for much of her life, and has been largely forgotten in the decades since.

Neither mousy nor subservient, as many assume her to have been, Clementine Churchill was so much more than an extension of her husband. Like him, she relentlessly privileged the national interest above her health and family; her list of extramarital achievements would put many present-day government ministers, speechwriters, charity chiefs, ambassadors, activists, spin doctors, MPs and hospital managers to shame. Unlike Winston, she was capable of great empathy, and she had a surer grasp of the importance of public image. In her trendsetting sense of style she was a precursor to Jackie Onassis—with her leopard-skin coats and colorful chiffon turbans—and her skills as a hostess played a crucial role in binding America to the cause of supporting Britain. For all this and more, she was honored by three British monarchs, and by the Soviet Union. Just surviving, let alone shaping, what must surely count as one of the twentieth century's

most challenging marriages should surely be a notable triumph in itself.

Winston once claimed that after their wedding they had simply "lived happily ever after." That is stretching the truth. There was never a break from the "whirl of haste, excitement and perpetual crisis"4 that surrounded them. She could not even talk to him in the bathroom without on occasion finding members of the cabinet in there, half-hidden by the steam. Nor were their exchanges always gentle. They argued frequently, often epically, and it was not for nothing that he sometimes referred to her as "She-whose-commands-must-be-obeyed."5 An opinionated figure in her own right, she was unafraid to reprimand him for his "odious"6 behavior, or to oppose privately his more noxious political beliefs; gradually she altered his Victorian outlook with what he called her "pinko" ideas and her support for women's rights. But however furiously they might have disagreed, she loved him and reveled in her union with a man so "exciting" and "famous." For his part, he simply doted and depended on her.

Throughout the first three decades of their marriage, Winston and Clementine were united by a common project: making him prime minister. When that goal was achieved, their aim changed and became survival itself. In peacetime, despite her misgivings about his refusal to give up politics, they were jointly dedicated to his legacy. Not only did they weather repeated public and personal humiliation together, they overcame the bitterest of personal tragedies and survived the all-but-intolerable strains of being at the center of two world wars. In so doing they forged one of the most important partnerships in history. The question is not just what she did for him, but what could he have done without her?

Even so, this formidable woman has virtually no public presence in popular history. While Churchill is understandably one of the most analyzed figures of all time, the preternaturally private Clementine has remained overlooked and unexplained. She is so elusive that views differ on such basic questions as the color of her eyes (gray, blue or hazel-brown?7) and hair (ash-blond, brown or red?8). Many people think Winston's wife was the "American one," when in fact it was his mother, Jennie, who came from the US. Consult certain biographies of Winston Churchill and she features as barely more than a passing acquaintance. The index of Nigel Knight's Churchill: The Greatest Briton Unmasked, for instance, contains not one single reference to Clementine. Other biographers, such as Richard Hough, author of Winston and Clementine: The Triumph and Tragedies of the Churchills, go so far as to claim that she was a "nuisance" who added to rather than reduced the pressures on her husband.

It is certainly true that Clementine was sometimes rigid and unforgiving, but in these traditionally minded, one-sided accounts Winston's own testament to what she meant to him has been conveniently underplayed or misconstrued. So have the perspectives of the many generals, politicians, ambassadors, civil servants and assistants who worked closely with them both and became her fervent admirers. Even Lord Beaverbrook, the buccaneering newspaper magnate who was for a long time her most loathed personal enemy, became in the end a devoted fan. It is ironic and telling that many of these incidental observers are far better known than she.

Today we are fascinated by the deeds and dress of our contemporary First Ladies, on both sides of the Atlantic. In a different era Clementine largely, if not wholly, escaped such media scrutiny. She hardly courted the press on her own account—though she was a skillful operator on behalf of her chosen causes. Yet she was more powerful and in some ways more progressive than many of her modern successors. The struggles she endured still resonate—not least her grueling inner turmoil, which Winston found so difficult to understand. It is high time for a fresh appraisal of the woman behind this great but erratic man, one that will allow her contribution to be duly recognized.

The only existing account of Clementine's life—an admirable book by the Churchills' daughter Mary Soames—was, although later revised, first published nearly forty years ago. It understandably treats its

subject from the family's viewpoint, with conspicuous gaps in the story. Since then many revealing papers—such as the Pamela Harriman collections at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC—have been released or have come to light for the first time, and several former staff have opened up about their experiences. What fascinates over and over again is the strength of the impression Clementine made on so many people, including allies from Russia, Canada, Australia and America, as well as those who witnessed her in action closer to home. Some contemporaries recorded a "physical shock" on meeting her for the first time. Who would have guessed that she laughed louder than Winston? That she was taller than him and decidedly more athletic? That he cried more than she did and owned more hats? That the camera never quite captured her startling beauty and that she could, like a princess, lift a room merely by entering it? Or that she was not the paradigm of upper-class matronliness but the surprising product of a broken home, a suburban grammar school and a lascivious mother, and that one of her most formative years was spent in and around the fish market at Dieppe?

This is not a history of the war, or a study of Winston Churchill from an alternative vantage point, although oft-neglected aspects of his character do come to the fore. It is, instead, a portrait of a shy girl from a racy background who was related to Britain's most glamorous aristocratic family (in more ways than one) but was looked down upon by her own mother and disdained by the dominant political dynasty of her day. It is the story of someone who feared casinos and bailiffs, and struggled to bond with her children. It is an attempt to recover the memory of a woman who married a man variously described as "the largest human being of our times" and "the stuff of which tyrants are made." (That he never became one is in no small part thanks to her.) Even before 1940 Clementine's life was packed with drama, heartache and endurance. But, colorful and troubled as her life had been thus far, all of that was merely a lengthy and exhaustive apprenticeship for her critical role as First Lady during her country's "death fight" for survival.

Before Clementine Britain had known merely the "politician's wife": opinionated, perhaps, but rarely directly involved in government business. And today we have much the same: women glossed up for the cameras on set-piece occasions, thin, smiling and silent. Her immediate successors—Violet Attlee in 1945 and Clarissa Eden in 1955—were of markedly lesser ambition and failed to pick up her baton. Clarissa, Anthony Eden's wife, was glamorous, younger, more intellectual and arguably more modern than Clementine (her aunt by marriage), but she lacked a populist touch and admits she was never even briefed on government business, and lacked "the gumption to ask." She said: "I can't believe how passive and hopeless I was."9 Clementine's postwar successor, Violet Attlee, was "jealous" of the time taken up by her husband's job10 and Harold Wilson's wife, Mary, was at first so overawed at being the prime minister's spouse that she would be physically sick every morning.11 Cherie Blair, probably the prime ministerial consort most involved in her husband's role since Clementine, explained the universal predicament thus: "There is no job description for the Prime Minister's spouse because there is no job. But there is a unique position that provides for each holder an opportunity and a challenge."12 How interesting that a woman born into the Victorian age, who never went to university, had five children and could not vote until her thirties, should have grasped that opportunity and challenge with greater ambition and success than any of those who have come since.

The case can be made that no other president or prime minister's wife has played such a pivotal role in her husband's government. It was arguably greater than that of even the greatest of American First Ladies, Clementine's direct contemporary Eleanor Roosevelt. This appears all the more remarkable in light of how poorly defined and resourced the position at 10 Downing Street is in comparison with that of American First Ladies. From the very earliest days of the Union the wife of the US president has enjoyed a status that, albeit not enshrined in the Constitution itself, provides an official platform for public work and influence, backed by the heavily staffed Office of the First Lady. Clementine had no official staff, role model or guidebook. She in effect invented her wartime role from scratch, and eventually persuaded an initially reluctant government to help her.

She never sought glory for her achievements and rarely received it. She was in fact genuinely astonished when noticed at all. Curiously, it was often visiting Americans who were most observant of the scale of her contribution during the war. The US ambassador Gil Winant was intensely moved when he accompanied her on a tour of bombed-out streets during the Blitz. As she talked to people left with little more than piles of rubble, he noticed the "great appreciation" she stirred in middle-aged women, who seemed inspired and uplifted by her presence. Marveling at the "deep" and "significant" looks of empathy that "flashed between her and these mothers of England," he was puzzled as to why the newspapers and indeed the British government made so little of what she did.13 Clementine's huge mailbag at the time was full of letters from people who were grateful for her help, people who viewed her as their champion. But while others, such as the queen, have been loudly and widely hailed for their war work, her part in the story seems to have been lost.

"If the future breeds historians of understanding," Winant wrote shortly after the return of peace, Clementine's "service to Great Britain" will finally be "given the full measure [it] deserves." This book attempts to do just that.

CHAPTER ONE

The Level of Events

1885–1908

Fear defined Clementine Hozier's earliest memory. Having been deposited by her nurse at the foot of her parents' bed, she saw her "lovely and gay" mother, Lady Blanche, stretch out her arms toward her. Clementine yearned for her mother's embrace yet she froze on the spot at the sight of her father slumbering at her mother's side. "I was frightened of him," she explained much later.1 By then the damage had been done. Clementine was never to gain a secure place in her mother's affections nor would she conquer her trepidation of the forbidding Colonel Henry Hozier, who, she came to believe, was not her father anyway. For all the fortitude she would show in adulthood, her instinctive insecurity never left her.

The Hoziers were living on Grosvenor Street, in central London, a far cry from the romantically haunted Cortachy Castle, in the Scottish Highlands, where Lady Blanche had grown up. Clementine's mother was the eldest daughter of the tenth Earl of Airlie, whose ancient Scottish lineage was enlivened by castle burnings and Jacobite uprisings. Her seraphic face belied her own rebellious spirit, and her parents, their family fortunes much reduced by the earl's gambling losses, had been keen to marry her off. They were thus relieved when in 1878, at the age of twenty-five, she became engaged to Colonel Hozier, even though he was fourteen years her senior and only come-lately gentry of limited means.

Lady Blanche's mother, also called Blanche, was a Stanley of Alderley, a tribe of assertive and erudite English matriarchs who combined radical Liberal views with upper-class condescension. They thought new clothes, fires in the bedroom and—above all—jam the epitome of excessive indulgence. Champions of female education, the Stanley women had cofounded Girton College in Cambridge in 1869. No less formidably clever than these eminent forebears, the elder Blanche had later mixed with the likes of the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, the Tory prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, his bitter Liberal rival William Gladstone, and John Ruskin, the art critic, designer and social thinker. She had made her ineffectual husband switch the family political allegiance from Conservative to Liberal and was equally forceful with her tearful granddaughter Clementine, who was not her favorite. It was evidently unfitting for a girl of Stanley blood to show her emotions.

Hozier's family made its money in brewing, gaining entrance to society thanks to the profits of industry rather than the privilege of birth. Although his elder brother became the first Lord Newlands and Henry himself received a knighthood in 1903 for his innovative work at Lloyd's of London after a distinguished career in the army, the Hoziers remained essentially nouveau: middle-class stock who earned their own living.

In the eyes of many in the City, Henry was a "flamboyant" personality, but the Lloyd's archives suggest a darker nature. He had graduated top of his class from Army Staff College and was decorated with the Iron Cross by Emperor Wilhelm I when serving as assistant military attaché to the Prussian forces during the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, and this and his service in Abyssinia and China appear to have gone to his head. His colleagues at Lloyd's thought he was a "born autocrat" with an "excessive love of power" and an absence of humor. He also apparently suffered from an "excessive" fondness for spending the corporation's money. An internal investigation in 1902 revealed that his business methods, while productive, were of "doubtful ethics." Some of his soi-disant successes were, in truth, exaggerated or unfounded, and after he challenged one persistent critic to a duel in 1906, his reputation inside the upper echelons of Lloyd's never quite recovered.2 Clementine was probably unaware of these stains on his character, admitting in a booklet she wrote for her own children, entitled "My Early Life," that she knew very little about her father's existence outside the home.

The earl considered his son-in-law a "bounder," and Lady Blanche soon discovered to her horror that her husband's previous career giving orders in the army had led him to expect the same unquestioning obedience at home. Far from liberating her from parental control, marriage to the splenetic and vengeful Henry proved even more restrictive. Before her wedding, Lady Blanche had assumed that she would become a notable political hostess in her own right. After leaving the military in 1874 Hozier had briefly dabbled in public life—standing unsuccessfully in 1885 as the Liberal Unionist candidate for Woolwich and helping to pioneer the idea of an intelligence service—but he had not the remotest interest in hosting his wife's freewheeling aristo friends. Nor did he want children. Lady Blanche decided that she would take the matter into her own hands if he refused to oblige her. It was not helpful that Hozier was frequently away on business and unfaithful himself. Sexy, bored and lonely, Lady Blanche saw no reason not to shop around for a worthy mate of her own.

Five years after her wedding day, on April 15, 1883, she gave birth to her first child, Kitty. Two years later, on April Fools' Day, Clementine (rhyming with mean, not mine) was born in haste on the drawing room floor. The twins—Nellie and William (Bill)—came three years later. It is now thought that none of the four children was Hozier's and that there may in fact have been more than one biological father. Although it was not unusual for upper-class couples in the late nineteenth century to take lovers, the custom was to wait until an heir had been born before playing the field. Discretion was also expected. Lady Blanche ignored all the rules to such an extent that there were rumors of altercations between rivals. Indeed, she is reputed to have juggled up to ten lovers at once—a feat of athletic organization that she was pleased to advertise quite widely.

Clementine had no knowledge of all this as a child, and the family has only in recent years publicly acknowledged the question marks over her paternity. Doubts were, however, well aired by others during her lifetime. Lady Blanche's own, albeit inconsistent, confessions to friends suggest that Clementine was in fact a Mitford. Her handsome and generous brother-in-law, the first Baron Redesdale, Bertie Mitford, was certainly a favored amour. Photographs of Clementine and Bertie—particularly in profile—suggest remarkable similarities, not least their fine aquiline noses. Perhaps it was as a tribute to her sister's forbearance in sharing her husband in this way that Lady Blanche named her second daughter after her. Bertie's legitimate son David went on to father the six renowned Mitford sisters: the novelist Nancy, the Nazi supporters Unity and Diana (whose brother Tom shared their fascist sympathies), the Communist Decca

and Debo, later Duchess of Devonshire, and Pamela, who largely escaped public scrutiny.

Besides Mitford, the other prime candidate is Bay Middleton, an avid theatergoer of great charm and private melancholy. He later broke his neck steeplechasing but was a frequent visitor to Lady Blanche during the years when she conceived her two eldest daughters. She dropped hints to notable gossips that he was the one, although some have since suggested that this was a fig leaf for her sister's sake. Such was the complexity of Lady Blanche's sex life that we shall probably never know the truth. Clementine's daughter Mary Soames found it "difficult to take a dogmatic view," saying, "Je n'y ai pas tenue la chandelle."3

The excitable younger Mitfords relished their great-aunt's racy reputation, but the rest of Lady Blanche's family thought her "mad." London's more respectable drawing rooms were similarly scandalized by the public uncertainty over the Hozier children's paternity, with the result that Lady Blanche was regularly snubbed. Meanwhile, her children were cared for by a succession of grumpy maids and governesses who vented their frustration by swishing their wards' bare legs with a cane. The one kindly soul in those early years was sixteen-year-old Mademoiselle Elise Aeschimann, a Swiss governess who arrived when Clementine was three. She thought the infant girl starved of attention and took to carrying her around everywhere, despite Lady Blanche's admonitions not to spoil her. Mademoiselle Aeschimann started Clementine and Kitty on their lessons, especially French, and though she stayed only two years her warmheartedness made a lasting impression. Clementine later went to visit her in Switzerland and even helped her financially when she fell on hard times in old age.

Clementine remained an anxious child, however, and was tormented by a perfectionist streak. According to her daughter Mary she had a "most sensitive conscience, and suffered untold miseries if the immaculate white of her lace-edged pinafore was marred by spot or stain."4 She took endless pains to form the neatest handwriting, a trait that led the adult Clementine to describe her younger self as a "detestable little prig."5 Her principal emotional crutch was a large black pet poodle called Carlo, which devotedly listened to her troubles until it was tragically killed under the wheels of a train. Clementine had been ordered to leave the dog behind at the family's new home, a country house outside Alyth in Scotland, but Carlo had pursued her to the station and tried to jump on board. "I do not remember getting over this," she told her children many years later.6 Such emotional neediness—and a continuing fear of adults—earned her much maternal scorn. Kitty, by contrast, was puckish, pretty, shared her mother's extroverted flamboyance and won Lady Blanche's effusive love. Unsurprisingly, she became accustomed to getting her way—even once threatening to burn down the house to stop a governess from reporting her latest misdeed. Lady Blanche's devoted preference for her firstborn was brazen and consistent.

In autumn 1891, Hozier sued for divorce and the two elder girls became "helpless hostages" in a bitter battle over custody and financial support. Clementine was just six when she and Kitty were wrested from their mother and sent to live with their father and his sister, the spinster Aunt Mary, who believed children benefited greatly from being whipped. Hozier found the girls an inconvenience, so he parceled them off to a governess in the Hertfordshire town of Berkhamsted. Rosa Stevenson advanced her charges little academically but both girls observed her fastidious housekeeping, including the two hours spent every day polishing the oil lamps: "They burnt as bright and clear as stars," Clementine remembered fondly.7 She also recalled the delicious sausages, "although the slices were too thin and too few."

Sadly, Aunt Mary considered Mrs. Stevenson too soft and uprooted the girls again, this time dispatching them to a "horrible, severe"8 boarding school in Edinburgh. The odor of yesterday's haddock and the crumbs on the floor offended Clementine, and like her sister she felt desperately homesick.

Hozier finally relented and allowed Lady Blanche to extract her unhappy daughters and whisk them back to her rented house in Bayswater, a district then known among the smart set as the West London "wildlands."

Waiting for them there were the four-year-old twins Bill and Nellie, who, after a year apart from their elder siblings, no longer recognized them. Hozier came for tea on a couple of occasions but his awkward visits were not a success and soon stopped altogether. Once the divorce was finalized, almost all of his financial support dried up. Lady Blanche may have had her children back, but she was now dependent on her own cash-strapped family for handouts.

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Over the following eight years, Lady Blanche and her brood led a peripatetic existence, moving from one set of furnished lodgings to another. In part this was out of financial necessity, to keep one step ahead of her creditors, but the constant roaming also suited her capricious nature. She ensured every new home was elegant and fresh, with snowy white dimity furniture covers (always two sets so they could be kept spotlessly clean) and fine muslin curtains on the windows. Clementine was enraptured by her mother's ability to spin comfort out of the least promising circumstances, writing in "My Early Life": "She had very simple but distinguished taste and you could never mistake a house or room in which she had lived for anyone else's in the world." Lady Blanche's exalted standards even inspired a new verb: to "hozier" became synonymous among her daughters' friends with to "tidy away." Unfortunately the cost of such stylish homemaking pushed the family ever further into debt.

In an effort to earn her keep, Lady Blanche, who was an excellent cook, wrote culinary articles for the newspapers, but she sometimes found herself too bored or distracted to put food on the table for her own offspring. She was frequently absent (presumably with one of her many lovers) but if her children sometimes wanted for maternal attention they rarely went short of instruction. Their mother employed full-time French- or German-speaking governesses and other teachers were brought in as required. The only, rigidly observed, omission from their education was arithmetic, which Lady Blanche deemed "unseemly" for girls.

Around 1898, when Clementine was thirteen, Lady Blanche decamped from London for rooms near the railway station at Seaford, just east of the English Channel port of Newhaven. There she lived with her dogs Fifinne and Gubbins on the first floor at 9 Pelham Place, a modest gray terrace house, while Clementine, Kitty, Nellie, Bill and their "feather-headed" governess stayed at number 11. Lady Blanche refused to muzzle her dogs, in contravention of strict new antirabies laws, and was once summoned to the magistrates' court in Lewes. Although she emerged from the trial with the desired "not guilty" verdict, perhaps due to the fact that one member of the bench was a personal friend, Clementine was troubled by her mother's being "not very law-abiding."9

This rackety existence could not have been in starker contrast to the four weeks the children spent every summer with their grandmother in the historic splendor of Airlie Castle. Here Lady Blanche's mother, the Dowager Countess of Airlie, kept an unblinking vigil against any hint of a lack of gratitude—a subject upon which she had written an essay—insisting on the need to instill this virtue in young children as "otherwise they grow up louts."10 She believed in fasting to "awaken the gifts of the Spirit" and loathed unladylike pursuits. Lady Blanche allowed Kitty and Clementine to play croquet (a practice that would later prove extremely useful) but only behind the gardener's cottage, out of Grannie's sight. She may have had a fiery temperament but her natural rebelliousness provoked her to give her daughters what were then unusual freedoms. Not only did she hire bicycles for them back in Seaford (with their being too expensive to buy), she allowed them to play bicycle polo on the rough grass opposite their lodgings too. Another beloved, unfeminine pastime was cricket, at which Clementine would in time become a decent player. She was also taught locally to play a creditable game of golf.

By now Clementine and Kitty were quite different: the former plain and awkward; the latter pretty and flirty—albeit impudent and ruthless as well. Clementine stood in her boisterous sister's shadow but never

showed any jealousy. In fact she found Kitty a comfort in a bewildering world. The star relied on a devoted supporting act, and while this role was far from easy it was nonetheless one in which Clementine came to excel. Like Lady Blanche, she was “dazzled” by her sister. Kitty, meanwhile, shared her younger sibling’s “unspoken contempt” for their mother’s “violent, ungovernable partiality.” “You mustn’t mind it,” she would counsel Clementine. “She can’t help it.”11

Clementine’s plight won sympathy from at least one of Lady Blanche’s friends—Mary Paget, a tenderhearted woman who often invited the girl to stay at her nearby home, West Wantley. Clementine adored the sixteenth-century manor with its ducks, chickens and boating lake, and envied the Pagets their stable family life. She considered Mary, who was her only real childhood friend, to be the most beautiful woman in the world. In truth, Mary was handsome but plump, and sometimes her stays would burst open while she was gardening. She pinned false gray hair into her rather sparse bun and it would habitually fall out among the flower beds.

Clementine’s fondness for this generous woman made her return to Seaford all the more wrenching at the end of the golden weeks spent in her care. Many tears would be shed, and noticing Clementine’s reddened eyes, Lady Blanche once angrily accused her of loving Mary Paget more than her. To which Clementine rashly replied: “Of course I do.”12 The Wantley trips were stopped.

With no real home or father, scant money and precious little maternal love, it is perhaps unsurprising that on the cusp of her adolescence Clementine entered an emotionally religious phase. She yearned for respectability and certainty, and in November 1898, she was confirmed in Kirriemuir Church, near Lady Blanche’s family seat, watched by her mother, grandmother and Mary Paget. Her piety became so fervent that on one occasion, after listening to a sermon on charity, she donated a pendant given to her by a relative, only to be admonished for giving away such a valuable gift and compelled to ask for its return.

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By the summer of 1899 Lady Blanche was deeply in debt. Hozier had failed to provide even the meager allowance he had agreed to following the divorce, but governesses still had to be paid, and then there were the annual fees for Bill’s education at Summer Fields preparatory school in Oxford. Lady Blanche wanted him to benefit from the sort of schooling expected of the grandson of an earl, but her mother’s help extended only so far, and lawyers instructed to pursue Hozier by her brother Lord Airlie had drawn a blank. Lady Blanche’s financial straits had been worsened by illness. Over the spring months she had suffered from quinsy, a nasty complication of tonsillitis involving abscesses on the throat. In the age before antibiotics, it was a serious condition and she was laid low, finding it difficult to swallow. She was hardly in a fit state to up sticks once again, yet in the last week of July, out of the blue, the children were told they had just hours to pack all their possessions as the next morning they were moving to France.

Lady Blanche had long suspected that Hozier might try to snatch back Kitty and Clementine and it appears she suddenly had reason to suspect a strike was imminent. It was this fear that had motivated her curious decision to move to Seaford, as the town lay a mere five hours across the English Channel from their destination, Dieppe. Such was the haste of their departure that she had no time to plan what they would do once they reached France. Family lore has it that she chose where to go on arrival with the toss of a coin. What we do know is that she hailed a cab for Puys and, upon spotting an attractive farm, La Ferme des Colombiers, along the way, ordered the driver to stop so that she might ask the owners if they had spare rooms. Luck was on her side and the family stayed there for the next two months, enjoying an idyllic summer of swimming and picnics. Clementine was living out of a suitcase once again.

In the autumn Lady Blanche moved her brood into town, renting a modest redbrick house at 49 rue du

Faubourg de la Barre in Dieppe itself, where she hoped to enroll the girls in the school at the Convent of the Immaculate Conception. Already an adept French speaker, Clementine adjusted well to her new setting, but she was keenly aware of her outsider status. When the nuns and other girls sided against the British following the outbreak of the Second Boer War in October 1899, she and Kitty played truant in protest, idling away the morning forlornly on the beach. Nonetheless, she enjoyed her surroundings. Much of her time was spent outdoors, and she became more athletic and confident, displaying a competitive streak on the hockey field, where she broke her stick during a particularly fierce bout with an opposing center-forward.

Lady Blanche made the best of her exile. She relished Dieppe's bohemian lifestyle, which attracted foreign writers and artists such as Oscar Wilde, Max Beerbohm and Walter Sickert. She also enjoyed the casino, quickly becoming a regular. Needless to say, she lost money she did not have, and to Clementine's shame, the family was forced to ask for credit in the local shops. She was learning all too young to deal with public humiliation, and it was difficult not to blame her mother for their plight. Here was the source of a lifelong puritan streak; her fear of gambling never left her—indeed, it would later come to haunt her in the most horrific fashion.

Clementine's acute discomfort was not shared by her mother. Still beautiful at forty-seven, Lady Blanche continued to walk proud. The Dieppois were intrigued by this titled lady who ignored the fashions of the day, replacing the customary hat perched on a bun with a stylish mantilla and long plait down her back. Nor did Lady Blanche's daughters escape her cut-price interpretation of la mode—when Kitty, Clementine and their younger sister, Nellie, went shopping in the markets they did so clothed in cheap gingham dresses.

Clementine was embarrassed by these deviations from upper-class norms but whatever their attire, the girls' beauty was making an impact. While Kitty was more striking, with her long dark hair and deep blue eyes, the slender, tall and fairer Clementine was finally beginning to blossom. The painter Walter Sickert, a frequent visitor, flirted with the older girl but he took Clementine more seriously. He once invited her to tea alone at his lodgings where he lived with Madame Augustine Villain, his mistress, model and landlady, and the acknowledged queen of the Dieppe fish market. Madame Villain had several children who looked uncannily like Sickert, but he also seems, to Clementine's horror, to have been involved with Lady Blanche. "She remembered terrible rows between her mother, Mr. Sickert and the fishwife," recalls Shelagh Montague Browne, who later worked for Clementine. "It was a ménage. The fishwife would be throwing things in the market in a jealous temper. Clementine thought it all so unseemly."

For all Sickert's reputation at the time as a figure of, at best, questionable morals known for his paintings of explicit nudes, Lady Blanche allowed her fourteen-year-old daughter to go unchaperoned to his house. (Later in life Clementine herself developed a poor opinion of Sickert, once telling Cecil Beaton, "He was, without doubt, the most selfish human being I've ever come across,"13 and the crime writer Patricia Cornwell has recently suggested—though her thesis is much disputed—that he might even have been Jack the Ripper.) Following her mother's instructions, Clementine made her way up to Sickert's room. Finding him absent and the place a shambles, she followed her instincts and tidied up, throwing away the remains of a herring on the table. When Sickert returned, he angrily informed her that she had discarded the subject of his next painting. She was terrified at first but they soon sat down to chat over brioches and tepid cider. By the time she emerged, her intelligence and poise had won his admiration.

One snowy winter's night late in 1899, Lady Blanche's fears were confirmed. She was with Kitty, Clementine and Sickert in her sitting room, which looked directly out onto the street. The fire was lit but the curtains not yet drawn when Clementine noticed a strange male figure at the window. Before she could look again, her mother had grabbed her and Kitty and pushed them both onto the floor. The mysterious man stared and stared through the glass while they continued to lie prostrate out of sight. When he finally turned away, they heard the doorbell ring, but as Kitty rose to answer it her mother sharply pulled her back down. After an

interminable wait, they heard the man walk away at last, and Lady Blanche revealed to the astonished girls that he was their father. She sent Kitty into the hall to see if he had left a letter.

Kitty returned with two, one for her, one for Clementine; they contained invitations from Hozier to dine and lunch with him in a private room at the Hôtel Royal on succeeding days. Clementine pleaded to be allowed not to go but her mother insisted they should; their trusty French maid Justine would accompany them to and from the hotel (although she would not be in attendance during the actual meals).

After Kitty's uneventful dinner, it was Clementine's turn for lunch. This time, Hozier tried to banish Justine from returning to collect her young mistress, insisting that he would escort his daughter home himself. Clementine directed an imploring look at her maid, begging her not to desert her, and during the meal of omelet and larks-en-brochette she was virtually speechless from anxiety. Hozier then delivered the dreaded news: she was to come to live with him, or rather with the whip-happy Aunt Mary.

Faced with this unthinkable prospect, Clementine exhibited a hitherto undetected determination and courage. While surreptitiously slipping on her gloves under the table, she announced calmly that her mother would refuse to allow her to leave Dieppe. The moment the faithful Justine returned for her, she rose from her chair and politely but firmly bade Hozier good-bye. In a fury, he suddenly barred her way, thrusting a gold coin into Justine's hand and pushing her violently out the door as he did so. Clementine was now trapped and alone with him once more, but when he moved to fetch a cigar, she valiantly seized her chance, flung the door open and ran full pelt toward Justine, who was waiting uncertainly outside. The two girls scrambled away as fast as they could on the icy pavements with Hozier, swearing angrily, in pursuit. Only once they neared the safety of the house did he finally give up and turn back.

The bank manager and the captain of the Dieppe–Newhaven steamer later confirmed that Hozier had been planning to kidnap Clementine and take her back to England that very afternoon. Her quick thinking had saved her. As her future husband would later put it, Lady Blanche's once timorous daughter had displayed an exceptional ability to "rise to the level of events."

Scarcely had one crisis passed before another came to test her. Just a few weeks later, in February 1900, Kitty contracted typhoid, probably from contaminated water. Clementine and Nellie were quickly sent away, making the long journey to relatives in Scotland alone. Fearing the effect on Kitty if she knew her sisters were leaving, Lady Blanche told them to say "good night" rather than "good-bye." The last they saw of Kitty, as they closed the door, was a silent and emaciated figure confined to bed.

With Bill already back at school in England, Lady Blanche was now free to pour all her energies into saving her sick child. She was helped by Sickert, who carried bucket after bucket of ice up to the girl's room in a bid to reduce her raging fever. But despite all her mother's efforts, Kitty died a month before her seventeenth birthday. Her body was taken back to England, where Lady Blanche pointedly chose to bury her beloved daughter at the Mitfords' home at Batsford rather than the family seat of Cortachy.

Clementine cut a lonely figure in the family now, for she was a young woman of nearly fifteen while the twins were three years younger and still children. Nor could her mother, who was never the same again, reach out to her. There was no enmity between them but their grief brought a further distancing. Clementine was never to know the full, undivided warmth of a mother's love and now she had lost the elder sibling who had understood and appreciated her. She became protective of her little sister, Nellie, but Lady Blanche also soon transferred her attentions to her youngest daughter, leaving Clementine out in the cold once more.

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Their time in Dieppe was now over. Less than a year after leaving England, the family was uprooted yet

again and returned to the picturesque suburban town of Berkhamsted, which offered cheap accommodation near a railway service to London and good inexpensive schools. They moved into an unpretentious Georgian terraced house on the high street, not far from where Clementine had stayed with Rosa Stevenson nine years earlier. She liked her new home, with its long narrow garden running up the hill at the back, and, despite the tragedy of losing Kitty, she was about to embark on what were probably the happiest and certainly the most settled years of her early life. Two months after her sister's death, Clementine started at the local grammar school, Berkhamsted School for Girls.

The experience was to change her outlook completely. Here she was fortunate to enjoy an education superior to that received by other aristocratic girls still tutored by governesses at home. A staff of clever, dedicated and often humorous female teachers quickly recognized her potential. Clementine was mixing with the largely friendly daughters of shopkeepers and doctors and both she and Nellie acclimatized quickly to all that provincial grammar school life entailed. Any awkwardness she might have felt in joining the school at fifteen, after her rackety aristocratic upbringing and with precious little formal schooling behind her, seems quickly to have dissipated. She had a particular fondness for her French teacher Mademoiselle Kroon, who would rouse daydreaming pupils with such lines as "Now, you fat bolster, wake up!" and she liked the company of her classmates. Indeed, she would seek them out again in later life, and would read the school magazine until her death. Seventy years after she left, Berkhamsted School was represented at her funeral.

On the family's return to England, Hozier asked to see Clementine once again. This time Lady Blanche accompanied her to his house in North Audley Street, London, but as she was taking leave of her daughter Hozier came to the door. He flew into a rage at the sight of his wife, leading to an ugly scene in the street and further mortification for Clementine. She had no way of knowing that this was the last time she would see this "strange, violent yet most compelling man."14 Despite her fear of her ostensible father, she later came to regret that Hozier, who died in Panama in 1907 at the age of sixty-nine, a year before her wedding, would never meet her future husband.

Back in the safe and studious atmosphere of Berkhamsted School, Clementine continued to thrive. Starting in what would now be tenth grade, she was quickly promoted to senior French. Lady Blanche's aversion to the teaching of sums, however, accounted for a humiliating demotion to a lower year for math. While Nellie was relaxed about her studies—preferring to devote her energies to captaining the girls' cricket team—Clementine was highly competitive. Nearly half a century later, when she returned to give a speech on the school's Commemoration Day in 1947, she spoke of the joy her education had brought her. "I loved it," she told the girls. "I felt I was out in the world, and on my own, away from the fiddling little tasks of arranging the flowers, folding the newspapers and plumping up the cushions."

Prizes came quickly. In 1901, she won a solid silver medal for French presented by the French ambassador, and even Lady Blanche now recognized her daughter's potential. The following year she treated Clementine to a trip to Paris with a former governess, Mademoiselle Louise Henri. Having been told to stay as long as they could on £25, they eked out this sum by barely eating. They visited museums, lectures and art galleries and Mademoiselle Henri gave Clementine thrilling glimpses of another world, pointing out famous music hall artistes in the street. Sickert, who turned up out of the blue one evening, also took her to meet the painter Camille Pissarro, who lived in a garret, and then to dinner in an elegant house where everything was "exquisite"—the food, the furniture, the host's manners. Clementine lapped up every minute; she now thirsted for worldly knowledge and experience.

Encouraged by her headmistress Beatrice Harris, whose embrace of feminine independence and suffragist views would have an enduring influence on Clementine, she was secretly nursing dreams of academia. University for women was still a comparative novelty, but Miss Harris (who later described her former pupil to Winston as "one of the high lights of the school" and "a worthy helpmeet"15) was so confident of

Clementine's chances that she offered to take her in over the holidays to continue her studies. This was going too far for Lady Blanche; she wanted her daughter to be well educated but not a bluestocking spinster. She rejected Miss Harris's generous offer and set about sabotaging Clementine's studious ambitions by diverting her into trivial traditionally feminine pursuits. Undeterred, Clementine crept up to the graveyard on the hill behind the house to study mathematics in secret, her books arranged across the flat tombstones. She was further spurred on in her studies by her great-aunt Maude Stanley, the sister of Lady Blanche's mother, who also introduced her to the exciting world of politics. A kindly intellectual spinster in her late sixties who took a great interest in the welfare of women and the poor, Maude considered Clementine a kindred spirit.

In the tussle over Clementine's future, however, Lady Blanche held the trump card. To stop this university nonsense once and for all she approached another relative, the wealthy Lady St. Helier, an aunt by marriage, and enlisted her help in launching Clementine into the world to which, by birth and upbringing, Lady Blanche deemed that she "properly" belonged. (Her own reputation and financial difficulties meant that she could do little to advance her daughter herself.)

Lady St. Helier—popularly known as Lady Santa Claus—loved to help the young. One of her beneficiaries, for whom she had pulled some strings in the British Army, was a certain Winston Churchill, the son of her American friend Lady Randolph Churchill, known to her closest friends as Jennie. Now here was a poor—and beautiful—female relation also in need of her support. Lady St. Helier invited Clementine to stay at her distinguished London mansion at 52 Portland Place, near Regent's Park, and bought her a gown. She took her to lavish balls and glittering dinners, where, no longer eclipsed by Kitty, Clementine was fêted for her beauty. Sure enough, she was distracted from her schoolbooks and her head was turned. The possibility of leading an independent life at university and beyond had glimmered briefly but was now snuffed out forever.

By the time Clementine passed her Higher School Certificate in the summer of 1903, there was no more talk of academia. She left Berkhamsted and Miss Harris behind, albeit with happy and grateful memories. Lady Blanche had been so successful at dispensing with Clementine's academic ambitions that she saw fit to reward her daughter by taking a house for them that winter in Paris, in the rue Oudinot in the seventh arrondissement. She even permitted Clementine to attend a few lectures at the Sorbonne. More to Lady Blanche's taste, however, was the fashionable Voisin, a smart restaurant near the Palais Royal. Clementine loved the glamour but worried that such lavish spending was unwise. Lady Blanche explained that it was merely part of a civilized education, and in truth the grammar school pupil was feeling ever more at home in high society. In the spring of 1904, she was sent to stay for three months with the von Siemens family, the founders of the German electrical engineering company of the same name, in a beautiful house on the lake in Wannsee, a fashionable suburb of Berlin. Here she perfected her schoolgirl German, learned to ride and absorbed all that upper-class Berlin life could offer. A certain Continental polish merely inflated her reputation. On her return to London there were plenty of invitations and soon lots of suitors too, with Nellie jokingly keeping a "file" of proposals under "Discussed," "Answered" and "Pending."

Chief among the pending was the eligible Sidney Cornwallis Peel. The younger son of a viscount (and grandson of former prime minister Sir Robert Peel), he was constant, fifteen years her senior and rich. He took her to the theater and sent her white violets every day. Lady St. Helier thought her job was done. But Clementine was a romantic, and she knew she was not in love. Despite all the pressure from her relatives to accept his hand, poor Sidney was simply not exciting; his letters veered from pleading to peevish and were generally, as he conceded himself, rather dull. He appears to have sensed that she was underwhelmed, writing in one of the few that have survived: "It was stupid of me to allow myself to be goaded into a black rage."16 She broke off one engagement but was later secretly betrothed to him for a second time.

Then, in April 1906, she found her nerve again—at her cousin Sylvia Stanley's wedding. Sylvia was in pain

from a broken arm but insisted that the ceremony go ahead. Her passionate determination to marry the man she loved contrasted sharply with Clementine's own tepid feelings and she parted from Sidney for the last time.

Afterward she seems to have panicked; after all, she needed to escape from her mercurial mother and what she would later confess to have been a "very difficult childhood."17 Within weeks she was engaged again, this time to Lionel Earle, a wealthy civil servant with intellectual tastes. He was twice her age, and she had known him for barely a month. When he joined her for a fortnight's holiday in the Netherlands, she saw him for the pompous bore he really was. Distraught, she broke off yet another engagement and had to return early wedding presents. The resulting emotional stress led to two months in bed.

Now that Nellie had also finished school, Lady Blanche gave up the lease on the house in Berkhamsted and moved to London to take a firmer hand in her daughters' social careers. It is not clear how she financed the rent, but Lady Blanche first opted for 20 Upper Phillimore Place, in Kensington, where Clementine had no choice but to earn her keep, supplementing her small allowance by giving French lessons at a half crown an hour. A year later Lady Blanche moved again, this time more permanently, to a cream-painted stucco house nearby at 51 Abingdon Villas (not then a modish address). Here Clementine also began working for her cousin Lena Whyte's dressmaking business. Needlework bored her, but she learned to make clothes and even hats—for herself as well as for clients. Later she compared these years to the struggles of Scarlett O'Hara, the heroine of Gone with the Wind, who keeps up appearances by making her gowns from old curtains.18

It was a very different existence from the idle luxury in grand houses enjoyed by her Stanley cousins Sylvia and Venetia, or the aristocratic circles in which her mother wanted her to move. Her clothes, for all Lady St. Helier's generosity and her own needle and thread, made her feel like an outsider. So too did her inability to return hospitality. She was all too aware of the sniggers about her lack of fortune and knew that the less charitable found a snobbish glee in calling her "the Hozier." She was also considered cold; but while certainly reserved, she was in the main trying to protect herself in a world that was both cliquey and savage. "Nobody knew who I was, so I felt terribly out of place," she recalled to one of her assistants later in life. "I hated it."19

Dressing in this era of upper-class Edwardian leisure was time-consuming and expensive, a process that involved high-maintenance coiffures, hats and numerous outfits. Just one "Saturday to Monday" country house weekend required several large trunks of different clothes, as outfits were changed four times a day. For her peers, there were servants who washed, starched, ironed, stitched, fetched and brushed and pinned up hair, whereas Clementine performed most of these chores herself. It is little surprise that as soon as she could afford one in later life she insisted on hiring a lady's maid, and kept one long after the role had largely gone out of fashion.

Lack of an adequate wardrobe meant that some invitations had to be refused, but Clementine had inherited her mother's genius for making the simplest outfits elegant. She was usually able to hold her own for an evening at least. Several contemporary accounts pour praise on her beauty. The diarist Lady Cynthia Asquith wrote that she should have been a queen, describing her as "classical, statuesque, yet full of animation . . . her superbly sculpted features would have looked so splendid on a coin."20 The society magazine the Bystander described Clementine in a 1908 issue as having "most delicately aquiline features, fine grey eyes, and a delightful poise of the head" with "the grace and distinction and soft strength of early Grecian art: she is divinely tall." Sir Alan Lascelles, the future royal secretary and most pernickety of aesthetes, told Clementine's daughter Mary that he would never forget his first glimpse of her mother in the Christmas holidays of 1903, when he was a sixteen-year-old schoolboy and she just two years older. Upon her announcement by the butler, the doors were thrown open to a large gathering, and in walked "a vision so radiant that even now, after sixty-one years, my always moving, always fastidious, eye has never seen

another vision to beat it."

The "beautiful Miss Hozier" was gratifyingly admired but Lady Blanche remained Clementine's harshest critic. For all her own wanton pleasure-seeking, she insisted her daughter return from balls by the impossibly early hour of midnight. When Clementine inevitably arrived home late, her mother would reprimand her in full view on her doorstep. On one occasion, Lady Blanche even boxed her ears, an assault so traumatic that Clementine ran without hat or coat the three miles to Mary Paget's house in Harley Street. The sympathetic Mrs. Paget went to reason with Lady Blanche before Clementine would agree to return home.

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A year after finishing school, during the summer season of 1904, Clementine attended a ball given by Lord and Lady Crewe at their home in Curzon Street. Among the guests in this Liberal household was Winston Churchill, now a rising young politician. Already a controversial figure, he was barred from most Conservative homes because earlier in the year he had defected from the party to join the Liberals over his opposition to tariff reform. (Winston was committed to the principle of free trade on the basis that it would keep food prices low, while the Conservative government was seeking to protect British industry with import duties.) Considered a renegade and class traitor by the Tories, he was viewed as pushy and puffed up even by admirers. His notorious adventures during the Second Boer War (the conflict doughtily defended by Clementine against her French classmates in Dieppe) and the insalubrious way in which his famous father, Lord Randolph, had died (reputedly from syphilis) lent him an air of raffish danger. A prolific author as well as a soldier and MP, he was already a celebrity.

Upon arriving at the ball, accompanied by his American mother, the voluptuous Jennie, Winston was arrested by the sight of a fawnlike girl alone in a doorway. He stood motionless, staring at her. He asked who she was and it transpired there were many connections between them: Jennie's brother-in-law, Sir Jack Leslie, was the girl's godfather and some years earlier Jennie herself had been a great friend of her mother. So Lady Randolph—whose supposed collection of two hundred lovers over her lifetime outnumbered even Lady Blanche's—introduced Winston to Clementine. The great wordsmith was struck dumb, not even managing the customary invitation to dance. Clementine assumed she had been introduced out of pity, and in any case did not care for what she had heard about this notorious publicity-seeker. He was, to boot, shorter than her and with his pale round face was not exactly handsome. Clementine signaled to a male friend, Charles Hoare, for rescue. He swept her away onto the dance floor, where he asked what she had been doing talking to "that frightful fellow Churchill."

It was an encounter that left no lasting impression on either of them. Winston had a habit of clamming up when first meeting beautiful women, as he had no capacity for small talk. He was also chauvinistically judgmental: he and his private secretary Eddie Marsh would habitually rank a woman on whether her face could launch "a thousand ships," merely two hundred, or perhaps just "a covered sampan, or small gunboat at most."21 Of course only an armada would do for him, so he had spent years chasing the "thousand ships" Pamela Plowden, daughter of the Resident of Hyderabad, Sir Trevor Chichele-Plowden. "Marry me," he had once declared, "and I will conquer the world and lay it at your feet."22 At other times, though, he was capable of "forgetting" to see or even write to her for months on end, and she detected something tellingly unphysical in his manner. In any case, his future was uncertain and his finances even more so, and Pamela Plowden was not a woman to gamble with her own comfort. Nor could she remain constant; after rejecting Winston's proposal in 1900 she married the less demanding Earl of Lytton and proceeded to take numerous lovers.

Winston, unlike so many other powerful men then or since, was not tremendously fired up by sex. For him, like the hero in his semiautobiographical novel Savrola, "ambition was the motive force and he was

powerless to resist it."23 Pamela rightly understood that any wife would always take second place to his career and that, although viewing their beauty with semireligious awe, he could be brusquely dismissive of women's conversation. His belittling of Lucile, the heroine in his novel, with the line "Woman-like she asked three questions at once"24 is indicative of his general attitude.

Winston felt he ought to have a wife, however. In the running around 1906 was shipping heiress Muriel Wilson, another willowy beauty with expensive tastes. Once again the sexual spark was missing, and in any case she found politics boring and could not envisage sacrificing her life of pampered luxury to the inconveniences of public duty. Her firm rejection was humiliating.

Before that he had flirted with the American actress Ethel Barrymore, who had caused a sensation in London when, in 1902, she arrived in a low-cut bodice pinned with flowers. Winston took her to the Churchills' family seat, Blenheim Palace, and upon her return to America he bombarded her with political news from Britain. He proposed to her two years later but her lack of interest was made all too clear when she inadvertently praised one of his greatest parliamentary foes.

Earlier still he had visited the West End music halls, once launching a rousing tribute to the dancers at the Empire Promenade, who were then under attack from antivice campaigners. "In these somewhat unvirginal surroundings," he recalled later, "I made my maiden speech." The nature of his interest in the dancers is debatable. On one occasion he went home with a Gaiety girl, who when asked the next morning how it had gone, replied that Winston had done nothing but talk into the small hours "on the subject of himself."25 So, as he approached his midthirties, he was still to marry or, as the newspapers liked to point out, grow a mustache or hairs on his chest. The press began to label him with that undesirable tag "confirmed bachelor."26

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One evening in March 1908, Clementine returned home tired after a day of teaching French to find a message from Lady St. Helier asking her to make up the numbers at a dinner the same evening. Clementine was reluctant: she had no suitable gown and was out of the requisite clean white gloves. But, under pressure from Lady Blanche, she eventually picked out a simple white satin princess dress and did her duty for her benefactress.

At 12 Bruton Street, Mayfair, Winston's faithful private secretary Eddie Marsh found him lingering in his bath. He was grumpy about the prospect of a dinner party that he fully expected to be a "bore." Marsh tactfully reminded him of Lady St. Helier's many kindnesses, and after more fuss eventually his boss rose from the bathwater to dress.

Clementine was already starting on the chicken course with the other guests by the time Winston arrived. Ruth Lee, the wealthy American who, with her British husband, Arthur, later donated their country house Chequers to the nation, wrote in her diary that Winston had taken the "vacant place on his hostess's left. He paid no attention to her, however, as he became suddenly and entirely absorbed in Miss Clementine Hozier, who sat on his other side, and paid her such marked and exclusive attention the whole evening that everyone was talking about it."27

Winston's fascination was piqued by one of the very necessities that, in Clementine's eyes, made her an outsider: never before had he met a fashionable young woman at a society dinner who earned her own living. Not only was this in itself to his mind worthy of respect but she was also ethereally lovely—another admirer had compared her to a "sweet almond-eyed gazelle." At twenty-two, she knew far more about life than the ladies of cosseting privilege he normally met, and she was well educated, sharing his love of France and its culture.

Through the influence of her aunts and her schooling, here was a woman who was actually interested in politics, if still unversed in its cut and thrust. She was receptive to new ideas, especially, it seemed, from him. For her, his gauche behavior at the ball four years previously had seemingly given way to a maturity and eagerness to please. She found his idealism and brilliance liberating.

After the ladies had left the table, Winston seemed exceptionally keen to finish his cigar and join them. He strode straight over to Clementine and monopolized her so obviously for the rest of the evening that the other women teased her when she finally left to fetch her coat. Years later, when asked whether she had found Winston handsome at that first meeting, she replied tactfully: "I thought he was very interesting."28 His one false move was an unfulfilled promise to send her a copy of his biography of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill: the omission "made a bad impression on me," noted Clementine later.

Thereafter he wasted little time. Within a couple of weeks he had invited Clementine and Lady Blanche to his mother's house, Salisbury Hall, near St. Albans, in Hertfordshire. There, Clementine had an early taste of political life when his promotion to the cabinet as president of the Board of Trade (at the precocious age of thirty-three) was announced during her stay. No doubt the excitement of being at the center of national events lingered in her thoughts as she embarked, soon after, on a long-standing trip to pick up Nellie from a tuberculosis clinic in the Black Forest and visit her grandmother in Florence.

Winston's first letter to her, on April 16, demonstrates a dramatic change in tone from his gushing notes to women such as Pamela. He wrote about how much he had enjoyed their discussions at Salisbury Hall, paying particular tribute to her cleverness. Here at last was a woman he could talk to rather than worship. "What a comfort & pleasure it was to me to meet a girl with so much intellectual quality & such strong reserves of noble sentiment," he wrote, adding that he hoped they would lay the foundations of a "frank & clear-eyed friendship" with "many serious feelings of respect."29 Clementine fired off an equally telling letter to Jennie: "You were so kind to me that you make me feel as if I had known you always. I feel no-one can know him . . . without being dominated by his charm and brilliancy."

In those days it was customary for MPs elevated to the cabinet to stand for reelection. So while Clementine was in Germany, Winston began campaigning in his largely working-class seat in northwest Manchester. In one letter to her, he referred in glowing terms to the help given to him on the stump by the famously good-looking Lady Dorothy Howard. Why he thought it fitting to praise this other woman for fighting on his behalf in every slum, crowd and street "like Joan of Arc before Orleans" can only be imagined. As can Clementine's reaction to his observation that Dorothy was "a wonderful woman—tireless, fearless, convinced, inflexible—yet preserving all her womanliness." On April 23 she replied: "I feel so envious of Dorothy Howard—It must be very exciting to feel one has the power of influencing people . . . I feel as much excited as if I were a candidate."30

This expression of political interest—with its hint of jealous concern—must have greatly pleased Winston, who may have been testing Clementine for her reaction. In a quick crossfire of correspondence, on April 27 he added: "How I should have liked you to have been there. You would have enjoyed it I think." He exhibited, moreover, a new mood of measured self-revelation, not least when he wrote: "Write to me again. I am a solitary creature in the midst of crowds. Be kind to me." Here at last the rumbustious adventurer of popular folklore felt safe enough to admit that he was lonely. Indeed, in all the seventeen hundred letters and notes that Winston and Clementine would send to each other over the next fifty-seven years, isolation among people would prove the most persistent theme.

To the woman who had since Kitty's death felt unneeded, this was a clear signal that she might at last have found a new role to play. And despite his praise for Dorothy Howard, there was no reason for Clementine to regard her as a threat. Howard was too didactic on both women's suffrage and teetotalism—neither cause

dear to Winston's heart—and he later referred to her as a "tyrant," if also "a dear." But he was at the same time something of a tease and liked to provoke Clementine to jealousy.

Her commitment was also tried when, for all Howard's efforts, on April 23 Winston lost the Manchester election. Now Clementine could see for herself the violent reactions he sometimes aroused. The Daily Telegraph, which had never forgiven him for abandoning the Tories for the Liberal Party, reported: "We have all been yearning for this to happen . . . Winston Churchill is out, Out, OUT." She could not help but admire, however, the way he picked himself up from this defeat before winning another election in Dundee the following month. She was now avidly reading the newspapers to monitor his every move.

Unusually self-sufficient, Clementine did not tell even close friends about her feelings, but she was convinced that she was in love. She saw Winston again several times in June and July but never alone. At times she would refuse his invitations, simply to avoid gossip, although she did agree to meet him at Salisbury Hall again in August. In the meantime, she was horrified to discover that a serious fire had broken out at a house where she knew him to be staying. Relieved to read in the Times that no one had been injured, she rushed to the post office to wire her joy to him.

Winston took this as a sign and persuaded his cousin Sunny, the Duke of Marlborough, to invite her to Blenheim. She demurred—not least because she was down to her very last clean dress. But Winston was insistent, promising that his mother and Sunny would look after her. "[Sunny] is quite different from me, understanding women thoroughly, getting into touch with them at once," he wrote rather naively. "Whereas I am stupid and clumsy in that relation . . . Yet by such vy different paths we both arrive at loneliness!"31

Clementine could refuse no longer. On August 10 she left the Isle of Wight, where she had been staying, and took the train to Blenheim. As she traveled through the English countryside, she wrote in shaky handwriting to Lady Blanche back in London: "I feel dreadfully shy & rather tired . . . I . . . can do nothing more intelligent than count the telegraph posts as they flash by." Soon afterward she was walking up the front steps into the gloom of Blenheim's great hall. There to greet her, below the muscular victory arch, were Winston; Jennie; the Duke; Winston's great friend F. E. Smith and his wife, Margaret; plus a private secretary from the Board of Trade. It was clear this was to be no low-key visit.

Alone in her high-ceilinged bedroom, she found a fire in the grate despite the August heat—an extravagance that no doubt offended her frugal nature. She looked in dismay at the bathtub, the hot and cold water jugs, the towels and sponges, knowing she had no way of dressing to the standards that her hosts would expect. Her spirits were lifted only when there was a knock at the door; noticing her unusual lack of a lady's maid, Jennie had discreetly sent her own. Yet despite this act of kindness, Clementine failed to sparkle at dinner, feeling impossibly shy in that cavernous Blenheim saloon with its forbidding military frescoes. Winston talked so much that perhaps he never noticed. He did, however, promise to show her the famous rose gardens overlooking the lake the following morning.

Punctual as ever, Clementine descended to breakfast at the appointed hour only to be left waiting and waiting. Fearing that she would flounce out at any moment, Sunny hastily invited her for a drive around the estate while he sent word of the emerging crisis up to Winston—who was still slumbering in his bed. The walk was hastily rearranged for the afternoon, when finally Winston escorted Clementine to the gardens. They strolled down the hill, following the twists and turns in the path through the cedars and oaks planted for suspense and drama by the great landscape architect Capability Brown. They toured the rose garden, only some of its flowers drooping from the heat, and admired the glimpses of the great lake through the leaves. Yet by the time they began to make their way back up to the house, still nothing of much import had been said.

Finally, a summer shower drove the couple to take shelter in a little Greek temple folly, but there was by now a certain tension between them. Clementine spotted a spider scuttling across the floor, and with steely determination quietly decided that if Winston had not declared himself before it reached a crack in the flagstones she would leave regardless.32 Happily, just in time, Winston asked at last if she would marry him. Without any further unnecessary hesitation she agreed, on condition that he promise to keep their betrothal secret until she had asked for her mother's consent. But as they were leaving the temple, a seemingly intensely relieved Winston spotted Sunny and could not help himself, shouting: "We're getting married! We're getting married!" Despite this minor betrayal, she later sent him a note via the footman: "My dearest One, I love you with all my heart and trust you absolutely."33

The next day Clementine left Blenheim with a letter from Winston to her mother, asking for Lady Blanche's permission to marry her daughter and promising to give his prospective bride a "station" in life worthy of "her beauty and virtues." He could not bear to wait for the answer, though, and at the last moment jumped on the London-bound train beside her.

Lady Blanche considered Winston just right for her unusual offspring. He did not have the fortune she would have liked, but he was brilliant and ambitious and could earn his own living—and at least he was marrying for romance rather than money. In an approving letter to her sister-in-law, she said: "I do not know which of the two is the more in love."34 Soon afterward Winston wrote to Clementine, "[There are] no words to convey to you the feelings of love & joy by wh my being is possessed. May God who has given to me so much more than I ever knew how to ask keep you safe & sound."35 Clementine responded gleefully: "I feel there is no room for anyone but you in my heart—you fill every corner."36

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News of the engagement drew mixed reactions. In Dieppe, Madame Villain ran through the streets crying out the news in delight. The chattering classes in London took a more negative view of the marriage's prospects, deciding that Clementine would either be crushed or prove insufficiently malleable. Her grandmother predicted that the woman she'd known as such a fearful child would obediently "follow" Winston and "say little."37 Lord Rosebery, the former prime minister, forecast the pair would last six months, because Winston was "not the marrying kind."38

Clementine told people that she was under no illusions that being married to Winston Churchill would be easy but she did think it "would be tremendously stimulating." She was also excited about her ring—"a fat ruby with two diamonds," she boasted to Nellie. But somehow, now that she was engaged she was more reticent with him, writing: "Je t'aime passionément—I feel less shy in French." It appears her reserve worried Winston; he wrote to F. E. Smith: "Is it fair to ask this lovely creature to marry so ambitious a man as myself?"39

Even so, he would not brook a long engagement. A date was fixed for the wedding at St. Margaret's, Westminster, for a month's time. Clementine wanted everything to be perfect, but as the days flew by with so much to be done she felt herself sinking. The newspapers were now following her every step. She was young, beautiful and marrying a celebrity; she was news, with all the personal invasion that entails. Photographs of her face were everywhere. The Daily Mail took a particular interest in a dress fitting that lasted, by its calculations, six hours. By contrast, Winston—tied up with his politics as ever—was rarely to be seen. There were moments when she began to falter, but her brother, Bill, steadied her. He reminded her that she had already broken off at least two engagements and that she could not humiliate a public figure like Winston Churchill.

There was a reason other than nerves for her wobble. Shortly after their engagement, Winston had embarked

on an eleven-hundred-mile round trip to a Scottish castle on a rocky promontory north of Aberdeen, where another beautiful young woman was waiting for him. Over the past year he had become close friends with Violet, the slender-waisted twenty-one-year-old daughter of his relatively new boss, the Liberal prime minister Herbert Henry Asquith. Although spoiled and immersed in a life of almost royal luxury, Violet had a brilliant mind—in her stepmother Margot's view "alas too brilliant"—and found most men her age dull. She held Winston, however, in the "high esteem he held himself." In fact, they were remarkably alike—opinionated, garrulous, idealistic, willful and pugnacious. Both, moreover, loved and lived politics. She met him at balls and dinners, or when he came to visit her father; soon she was clearing her diary to see him all the more. Later Violet would insist they had always been just friends, but all the signs are that she was deeply in love. She declared herself "inebriated" by the way he talked and "enthralled" by his genius. Unfortunately, Winston was not in search of a female version of himself.

Upon learning of the engagement on August 14, Violet had reputedly fainted and then written a venomous letter to Clementine's cousin Venetia Stanley, who was to be a bridesmaid at the wedding. Winston's new fiancée, said Violet, was as "stupid as an owl," no more than "ornamental," and incapable of being "the critical reformatory wife" Winston badly needed in his career to "hold him back from blunders." Venetia replied by noting that the Manchester Guardian had (generously) included in a list of Clementine's accomplishments six languages, music and brilliant conversation, adding, "I think he must be a good deal in love with her to face such a mother in law."40 Even so, Violet's stepmother, Margot, remained convinced that Clementine had no brains, character or strength and was in fact "mad," whereas Violet's patronizing view was that she was "sane to the point of dreariness." Asquith himself predicted merely that the match would be a "disaster."

Clementine later admitted to finding such a reception as Winston's new fiancée "petrifying" and had instinctively opposed his decision to go ahead with his long-planned visit to Violet's holiday retreat—where Miss Asquith was caustically remarking that at least the engagement would provide "the Hozier" with a rest "from making her own clothes." Winston fatefully concluded it was still his duty to make his peace with the other woman who loved him, and once there, he and Violet went for romantic cliff-top hikes—but their time together soured when she slipped and cut her face, leaving her miserable and, in her own words, looking "worse than the vampire in Jane Eyre."41 By the time he left a few days later, she was almost hysterical.

Although the Asquiths were invited to the wedding, they did not come. Not that Violet had done with Winston; far from it. But Clementine would soon discover that she had more than one rival on her hands for his attentions.

CHAPTER TWO

More Than Meets the Eye

1908–14

Waking up at dawn on her wedding day in a large, chilly room at Lady St. Helier's mansion did nothing to boost Clementine's spirits. Exiled by her mother from her own home to make room for guests, she was cut off in Portland Place from the bustle of family life. She longed to return, even if only for breakfast, for one last taste of the familiar before taking the leap into the unknown as Mrs. Winston Churchill.

Alas, a maid had taken away her day clothes, leaving her nothing to wear but her wedding dress. Feeling trapped, Clementine crept down the majestic staircase in her dressing gown while the house was still in shuttered darkness and Lady St. Helier asleep. The only soul about was a young under-housemaid blacking

the grate in the morning room. Seeing a friendly girl of similar age, if not prospects, Clementine unburdened herself of her troubles. The good-hearted servant quickly abandoned her work to scurry upstairs to her attic.

Minutes later, a figure slipped out of a back door in the classic uniform of an off-duty maid. Wearing a dark, close-fitting cheap coat over a pretty print dress and black-buttoned boots, she hopped on a bus west to Kensington. A conductor, recognizing his famous passenger from the newspapers, suggested Clementine must have made a mistake. London was abuzz with the excitement of an aristocratic beauty marrying a global celebrity. Crowds of the scale normally seen only at a royal wedding were already beginning to take up their positions on the streets. But now here was the bride riding a bus away from where the ceremony was due to take place.

Nothing would deter her from returning to Abingdon Villas, however, and she arrived to astonished gasps, not only at her presence but also her unexpected attire. A merry time with Nellie and Bill restored her resolve and she soon headed back (by horse-drawn brougham this time) to prepare for the two p.m. service at St. Margaret's in Parliament Square.

It was September 12, 1908, and many grandees were still away on holiday, including half the cabinet, who had sent their regrets. Among the thirteen hundred guests who did turn up to Parliament's parish church were David Lloyd George, the Liberal chancellor of the Exchequer; F. E. Smith, one of the few Tories who had forgiven Winston's defection to the Liberals; and General Sir Ian Hamilton from his army days.

A number of places on the bride's side—it was anyone's guess exactly how many—were occupied by her mother's former admirers. Some were mischievously placed together, such as the gossipy poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and the Scottish peer Hugo Charteris, but significantly it was Bertie Mitford who sat in the front row beside Lady Blanche, who was resplendent in a purple silk gown trimmed with white fur. On the groom's side of course was Winston's mother, Jennie, competitively dolled up in beaver-colored satin and a hat decorated with dahlias. A fading beauty of fifty-four, she was now married to a man a mere fortnight older than Winston by the name of George Cornwallis-West.

The bells of Big Ben struck two o'clock, and four minutes later Clementine entered the fifteenth-century white-stone church on the arm of her handsome brother, Bill, now an officer in the Royal Navy. She walked down the aisle framed by rows of soaring white Gothic arches, bathed in the autumn sun streaming through the windows. Draped in shimmering white satin, a veil of tulle clipped to her hair by a coronet of fresh orange blossom, she wore diamond earrings from Winston and clutched a bouquet of fragrant white tuberoses and a white parchment prayer book. Behind Clementine were five bridesmaids—Nellie, cousins Venetia Stanley and Madeline Whyte, Winston's cousin Clare Frewen and a friend, Horatia Seymour. All wore amber-colored satin gowns and carried bunches of pink roses. More roses and camellias tumbled across their large black satin hats.

The choir sang "Lead us, Heavenly Father" while members of the congregation climbed on their seats for a better look. Many thought Winston fell short as the dashing groom in the presence of such elegance, and flanked by his dapper best man, the mustached Lord Hugh Cecil. He was losing hair and gaining weight, his face "settling into the attitude of pugnacity it was to become famous for."1 Tailor and Cutter magazine branded his morning suit "one of the greatest failures as a wedding garment we have ever seen," claiming that it lent him the appearance of a "glorified coachman." When Clementine reached this unprepossessing figure before the altar, he somewhat bizarrely held out his hand and warmly shook hers.

Dean Welldon, who had been Winston's headmaster at Harrow, proceeded to sum up what was now expected of the bride. A statesman, he declared, should be able to depend "upon the love, the insight, the penetrating sympathy and devotion of his wife." Her role, and the influence she would exercise in her

husband's future public life, was so important as to be "sacred." Winston's vows after this portentous address were loud and clear, hers so soft as to be barely audible. The whole ceremony was a rehearsal for her future; when signing the register, Winston deserted her for an animated political discussion with Lloyd George.

When the married couple finally emerged from the church, mounted policemen held back the cheering throngs along the route to the reception back at Portland Place. There, guests were treated to a display of the wedding gifts: twenty-five silver candelabra and a large collection of wine coasters, pepper pots and silver inkstands paraded alongside a gold-topped walking stick sent by King Edward VII, and £500 in cash from the fatherly figure of German-born financier Sir Ernest Cassel. Clementine's aunt Maisie had given her a chain set with "myriads" of sapphires, opals, amethysts and topazes, Winston's aunt Cornelia a diamond necklace. Alongside these treasures were a fresh turbot with a lemon stuffed in its mouth—a gift from Madame Villain of Dieppe—and a manual entitled House Books on 12/- a Week.

The crowds had been won over by Clementine's grace and beauty, and so had the press. In one of the next day's papers a cartoon of a grinning Winston holding a stocking appeared over the caption: "Winston's latest Line—Hoziery." "Undoubtedly," proclaimed the Times, the event had "captured the public imagination." The Daily Mirror hailed it as "the Wedding of the Year."

They spent their first evening as husband and wife at Blenheim—the palace having been tactfully vacated by Sunny, the duke. It can only be guessed who was the more nervous. Both were almost certainly virgins and at nearly thirty-four, Winston's manly pride was at stake. He had been worried enough beforehand to seek advice from an expert—his mother. By the time they left Blenheim a couple of days later for Baveno on Italy's Lake Maggiore, it appears the young couple had got the hang of things. On September 20, Winston was able to report to Jennie that they had "loitered & loved,"2 and with surprising candor he described sex to his mother-in-law as "a serious and delightful occupation." Perhaps Winston applied the same energy and attention to the details of lovemaking as he did his other "occupations." Within a month of their return from their honeymoon Clementine was pregnant.

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While the newlyweds were busy loving in Italy, Clementine's cousin Venetia had traveled to Slains Castle to stay with Violet Asquith. A week after the wedding, Venetia burst into the dining room to announce that she could not find her friend, who had last been seen at dusk, book in hand, on a cliff-top path. Guests, servants and villagers were summoned to search the sharp rocks at the foot of the sixty-foot drop, shouting, "Violet!" into the moonless mist as the sea crashed angrily about them. It was treacherous work lit only by lanterns and toward midnight hopes started to fade. Her father sobbed into his wife Margot's arms. She started to pray.

Shortly thereafter, cheers went up from some fishermen: Violet had finally been found unhurt on soft grass near the house and was already regaling her rescuers with thrilling tales of having slipped on the rocks and knocked herself unconscious. News got out and reporters quickly descended on the castle, demanding photographs and interviews. Sensational headlines such as MISS ASQUITH'S PERIL and HOUSE PARTY'S THRILLING SEARCH followed, but Violet's eagerness to oblige the press led Margot to suspect that the "accident" might not have been altogether accidental. Doctors could find no evidence of a blow to the head and the more Margot tried to avoid publicity, the more thrillingly near-fatal Violet's story became. Some even began to speculate that Violet had attempted suicide, although it seems almost certain that she had merely intended "to cause [Winston] a pang."3 Either way, Violet was becoming a specter at Clementine's feast.

Margot removed Violet and the family from the eerie atmosphere at Slains, a vast, ancient and reputedly

haunted castle perched on the edge of a desolate headland, but for some time after the so-called Rock Affair her stepdaughter continued to show signs of “almost hysterical”4 behavior. Violet’s father, the prime minister, feared more unhelpful attention and had to intervene personally to stop her racing off to meet Winston when he arrived back in Britain. With time, her mood calmed, and she finally returned to London. But Winston was still concerned, and in November he arranged for her to have lunch with him and his new wife. Violet behaved well, but the conversation was no doubt strained and the newly pregnant Clementine would not have been in her best form. Winston’s decision to catch a cab alone with his guest afterward appears thoughtless, but according to Violet’s account he was eager to impress upon her that Clementine “had more in her than met the eye.” With what Violet herself described as “cloying” self-restraint she responded: “But so much meets the eye.”5

Though mostly sensed rather than heard, the continuing criticism from such quarters was wreaking havoc on Clementine’s fragile confidence. Violet and her family were at the center of a snobbish circle of brilliant intellectuals with immense power and privilege. Her bosom pal Venetia, Clementine’s super-confident Stanley cousin, could finish the Times crossword without needing to write in a single letter. By contrast Violet thought Clementine “very nervous & excited in public” and prone to “beginning her sentences over & over again & constantly interrupting herself.” Her eyes, reputedly her best feature, were actually “tired & pink.” But Violet also noted that her figure was “Divine” and (rather condescendingly) that the content of her conversation was beginning to improve. Clementine, meanwhile, understandably enjoyed it when others turned a critical eye on Violet—although she would wisely refrain from joining in. She knew the esteem in which Winston held her rival and could not help but be jealous. The sentiment was mutual.

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Clementine’s pregnancy made Winston’s bachelor apartment in Bolton Street impracticable. Although fitted with electric lighting, it was tall and narrow with endless flights of stairs. Every surface—even in the bathroom—was covered with model soldiers, polo team photographs, tiny silver cannon or books. This was no place for Clementine to make her first real home, and by the time she returned from her honeymoon, it was even less so. Jennie had given her bedroom a surprise Edwardian makeover, dressing it with sateen bows for the full boudoir effect. A natural minimalist, Clementine could barely conceal her horror; she now considered her mother-in-law a “trial.”6

For her part, Jennie had welcomed Winston’s choice of bride but this marked the beginning of a fraught relationship between the two women. Clementine saw how Winston adored his mother despite her faults. She had seemed a “fairy princess” to him as a child, and later he had harbored somewhat Oedipal feelings for her. Aged twenty he had written in a letter: “How I wish I could secrete myself in the corner of the envelope and embrace you as soon as you tear it open.”7 Even now Winston often chose to walk arm in arm with his mother, leaving Clementine feeling like an intruder.

In recent years Jennie had marshaled her formidable intellect, contacts and womanly charms (although some argued not her critical faculties) to advance Winston’s career. Having pioneered the role first of active political wife and then mother, Jennie was a hard act for Clementine to beat. A flashing-eyed voluptuous beauty—once described as “more panther than woman”—and one of the first American heiresses to marry into the British aristocracy, Jennie had many male admirers, including the king, but the bed-hopping that had lately benefited her son offended Clementine’s rigid moral code, as did her marriage to the young and impecunious George Cornwallis-West, which she viewed as “vain and frivolous.” (Cornwallis-West was in fact pursuing a flamboyant affair with the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell and the marriage ended as widely expected in 1914. Jennie cited his refusal to grant her conjugal rights as grounds for divorce and became dependent on her sons for support.)

When that marriage broke down, Clementine, according to her daughter Mary, "resented the way [Jennie] leant so heavily on her elder son . . . They never had a classic falling out. It's just that [Clementine] never joined in the chorus of praise for her mother-in-law."8 She also railed at Jennie's extravagance. Winston's mother, a friend explained, was a woman for whom "life didn't begin on a basis of less than forty pairs of shoes."

Clementine blamed Jennie for Winston's own excesses and was appalled to discover how she and her late first husband, Lord Randolph, had neglected their eldest son throughout his childhood. His mother, she felt, had only "discovered" Winston when he became "famous," after his father's death. While at school he had sent Jennie letter after letter pleading with her in vain to visit him, the crosses for his kisses so numerous they would fall off the page. At fourteen, Winston was still writing, "I long to see you my mummy," but Jennie considered him too "ugly," "slouchy and tiresome"9 to bother with. Her selfishness and his lack of a settled home life made him feel "destitute."10 For both Winston and Clementine a steady, loving childhood had been unknown.

Clementine could also empathize with Winston's pain at his father's obvious preference for his younger, less troublesome brother, Jack. Lord Randolph barely spoke to Winston unless to deliver a rebuke; some historians go so far as to suggest his father actively loathed his son. Winston was a disappointment to him: the poor results he achieved on his entrance exam consigned him to the bottom class at Harrow and he was considered not to have the brains for the bar, let alone Oxford, although the more enlightened teachers recognized that he had unusual gifts. Even by upper-class Victorian standards their parental neglect was unusual. Friends and relations would urge them to "make more" of Winston; one kindly soul, Laura, Countess of Wilton, even wrote to him as self-appointed "deputy mother," sending him money and food. Jennie failed even to remember her sons' birthdays.

As children both Winston and Clementine had relied on middle-aged women outside the family for emotional sustenance, in his case none more so than his nanny Mrs. Everest, whose unconditional love was the only thing that made him feel safe. It was she who had ensured Winston was extracted from a prep school where the sadistic headmaster repeatedly flogged him. Mrs. Everest had also tried to rein in his spending and instructed him to be a "kind" gentleman. He loved her gratefully, but his upbringing nonetheless left him selfish and "emotionally insatiable."11

A sickly youngster with a lisp and weak chest, Winston had been bullied at school—at seven he had on one occasion been pelted with cricket balls. Clementine had also been taunted in her early years by more rumbustious children and both had eventually developed strategies for self-protection—in his case naughtiness, in hers reserve—to hide their insecurities from public view. But neither had lost an instinctive sympathy for the underdog.

They both also knew what it was to lose a father and to endure a mother's "frantic sexual intrigue." Just as there were stories that she was not Hozier's child, it was rumored that Winston had been conceived before marriage. Witnessing Lord Randolph's public decline from young political titan to raging invalid had been a further agony for his son. Only twenty when his father died a grotesque death reputedly from syphilis in 1895, Winston never established a connection with him and always felt in his shadow. The penetrating screams of Lord Randolph's last days may have contributed to his own rejection of casual sex.

Thus Winston, like Clementine, craved comfort and protection. Marriage allowed him to recapture that sense of security he had felt in Mrs. Everest's nursery, to be folded at long last within a woman's comforting embrace. Since his Victorian upbringing deterred him from talking about sex in an adult way, he adopted baby talk instead. He began addressing Clementine as "Puss Cat" or "Kat," while he became "My Sweet Amber Dog" or "Pug," and there was much mention of lapping cream and stroking warm, furry coats.

Respectable women were in any case at this period presumed to be unburdened by libido, and Winston had a particular dislike for overt sexual predators.

Nor, again like Clementine, did he form close friendships easily. Precocious and bumptious, he had been unpopular with his peers as a child, probably not helped by the fact that his contacts outside the immediate family before he went to school were primarily with servants. When he twice failed to get into the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, the elite training academy for British Army officers, the specialist tutorial college he was sent to observed, "[T]he boy has many good points but what he wants is very firm handling."12

These were, then, two insecure people with much in common. One crucial difference was that Winston had spent much of his childhood at Blenheim Palace, while Clementine knew what it was like to live in cheap lodgings. He had always had servants and had never drawn his own bath or traveled on a bus. Just because he was now married and—as the son of a younger son in an aristocracy run on primogeniture—far from rich, he saw no reason for this to change. Clementine, a former habitué of the Dieppe fish markets, was terrified of spending money they did not have in an effort to live up to his exacting requirements.

In early 1909, they bought a lease on 33 Eccleston Square, a cream stucco house in semifashionable Pimlico. This was to be their first family home and Clementine was finally able to decorate in her own simple style, although she let herself go in her bedroom, where she appliquéd an Art Nouveau design of a large fruit tree in "shades of orange, brown and green."13 She never experimented so flamboyantly again, which is arguably just as well. A later tenant, the foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey, showed the mural to the French ambassador, who was reportedly struck with "horror." (But Grey also wrote to her saying Eccleston Square was the "nicest" house he had ever had in London and that it gave the "impression of belonging to nice people.")14

Clementine insisted on having her own bedroom from an early stage. Indeed, after Bolton Street the couple would not share a bed at home again. They kept different hours, she preferring to rise early and he to retire late. And it was not just the Sandhurst college that recognized he needed "very firm handling." Winston was quickly made to observe the "protocol of the bedchamber": Clementine needed refuge from her husband's "dominating brilliance," so he was allowed entry to her room by invitation only, thus placing him in the position of supplicant, always hoping to "kiss her dear lips" and "end up snugly" in her arms. Occasionally, upon turning in, she would leave a note indicating that he might be in luck that evening. But he could never bank on it.15

Winston was not the only member of the family who needed "handling." Jennie showed no signs of retreating gracefully, grabbing the chance to decorate her son's new bedroom and insisting on choosing the color for the front door. As Clementine's pregnancy progressed and she went to rest in the country, however, Winston chose to defer more frequently to his wife. He dutifully reported on marble basins, bookcases, paints and progress in chasing up the builders. He commended her on her thrift, which saw old carpets being reused despite the odd stain and shabby edges, while cheap linoleum was put down in the servants' rooms.

Clementine was seven months into her pregnancy before they were finally able to move in. She passed some of the time at Blenheim with Goonie, the wife of Winston's brother, Jack, who was also expecting, and the two struck up a mutually supportive friendship, but she could not shake off her fears about the birth. Goonie—whose real name was Gwendoline—had her baby first and Winston used her "smooth and successful" delivery of a healthy boy to reassure Clementine. He insisted she had suffered little but was himself still nervous about the impending event: "I don't like your having to bear pain & face this ordeal. But . . . out of pain joy will spring."16

Not that his concern prevented him from leaving her on her own to pursue politics and steep himself in male society. At the end of May he went to Blenheim for the annual camp of the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars, of which he was an officer. He greatly enjoyed it but Clementine could not face a large house party. In those days expectant mothers were rarely seen and their condition barely alluded to (most thought the word pregnancy suitable only for medical books). So on June 1, just shy of a month before she was due to deliver, she went to stay in relative seclusion with Lady St. Helier's daughter in Buckinghamshire. At this point Clementine's old tremulous self returned to the fore. On her way she stopped for lunch at what looked like a "respectable" commercial travelers' hotel in Slough, only to be "terrified" when she found it "infested by several dirty men."17 On another occasion she locked herself in a train lavatory for fear of cutthroats climbing through a carriage window.

Although anxious about her well-being, Winston was unwilling to change his ways. Their frequent separations—a pattern that would last throughout their marriage—threw them into stark contrast with other political couples of the time. (Stanley Baldwin and his wife, Lucy, spent only one night apart in their entire life together.) These periods apart gave rise to some seventeen hundred letters, telegrams and notes between them that survive today, and a habit of putting their thoughts to paper that persisted even when they were under the same roof.

Diana Churchill was born at home on July 11, and although it was not yet customary for fathers to attend the actual birth, Winston was at least nearby. Even now, however, Violet remained in his thoughts; he wrote to her three days later claiming (unconvincingly) that Clementine had invited her to "come back again to see the baby." "After four almost any afternoon Miss Churchill receives,"18 he wrote proudly from his desk at the Board of Trade.