

CHAPTER THIRTY

Most people would have been able to tell you where they were and what they were doing when they heard that war had been declared. Mark had been in a remote farmhouse in the far west of Iowa. Michael had been sat in his study in the flat when Mrs Maynard had come in, apologised, saying that she had listened to the broadcast and felt that it was something that he ought to know. Had she spoken her mind she would have told him that he should have been out there, listening, as she had and she was sure her husband had.

As it was, Christina's secretary was close to tears, fearful that her husband would now be taken from her and sent abroad, and that her daughter would also be taken from her and sent to a camp or even Australia, for her safety, he was to understand. Then their small house in Bromley would be requisitioned and used for some unspecified purpose to help the war effort, or singled out and completely destroyed by enemy forces. The water would be cut off as it would all be required for fire fighting. How was food to reach them when German submarines would blockade the channel and the Atlantic? They had done it in the first World War. They were bound to do it again. Even Napoleon had done it! It all seemed very wrong to her that they should be dragged into a war over some distant country that no-one knew anything about except they had been responsible for issuing some dull postage stamps, a number of which resided in her daughter's stamp album.

Michael nodded and agreed in what seemed to him to be appropriate places, shook his head in others, and wondered where his wife was and why she had left her secretary alone in the flat with him. Declaration of war did not happen every day of the week. True there had been skirmishes in Palestine and Eritrea, and the business in Spain, but this had a different feel about it, a sense of purpose, of commitment. "Herr Hitler will probably back down," he said, trying to calm this excitable and distraught woman, "and even if he doesn't, it will all be over quite quickly, probably before Christmas. We will send a small force, slap a few wrists, and everything will be back to normal. You will see."

It all sounded fine, this rhetoric. Michael had heard all the jingoism as similar words were bandied about or printed in newspapers. He did not believe a word of them. He did not believe that his father had been preparing all these years for something that would be over in a couple of months, by Christmas. No doubt his father was now congratulating himself and his foresight. There would be problems; contracts unfulfilled or suspended, goods in transit on the high seas between hostile nations, sums unpaid and un-collectable. Knowing his father, he had probably taken preliminary advance steps to minimise his exposure and risk. There would be some lost business. His father would not have been able to resist the temptation to dip his foot in as risks and prices increased. The closer the day came, the more lucrative. Michael had little doubt that the trade would include weapons designed to maim or kill. New markets would be opening up and his father would be anxious to enter them, possibly looking for his help and support. It would be better if he kept out of his father's way for a few weeks.

Would he hear from Paul now, now that the announcement had been made? He was probably right. It could be a long and difficult struggle which could rapidly engulf the whole of Europe. No doubt Spain and Italy would side with Germany and Austria. Russia would eye the Slav nations on her eastern borders. Spanish troops would enter France from the Pyrenees whilst Italian troops came through the Alps. What price the Maginot line then?

Yes, the War would seriously affect business and their lives. Any day now, if Paul went through with his word, he would receive papers instructing him to report to an Army camp somewhere and take command of one of these teams that Paul was setting up. So, what should they do, he and Christina? There would be those who would move to the country, but the thought of going to Newington did not appeal to Christina and it did appear a large step nearer to the Continent. There would be those who would flee to America where Mark was now, and where, he assumed, Mark would stay. And there would be those who, because they wanted to, or because they simply had no alternative, would stay where they were or go and fight.

It would probably mean a delay in selling the flat. No-one would wish to purchase it,

not whilst there was a war on. They might be able to rent it out. There might even be a demand for vacant furnished property in London because of the war, but now he was thinking like his father. He and Christina could then move to the house in Bloomsbury, or she could even go and live at his father's house and keep Sophie company.

There would be a rush of young men to volunteer, the Arthur Browns of the World. No doubt they were doing it even now. What was it Fishwick had said about his father buying scrapyards? Sophie had told him that he had also bought hundreds of second-hand buses and lorries. No doubt he assumed that there would be a shortage as soon as the Country mobilised.

Michael waited for Christina to return. She was probably with Helen who had been delaying her move to Newington in case Mark suddenly announced he was coming home. No doubt they would be discussing what would happen to Angela. Angela! He had almost forgotten about her. They would be concerned and he would have to reassure them, but what could he say? Frau Cerny was the wife of a very powerful and influential man who would know how to protect both her, an enemy alien, and himself, but beyond that there was little that could be said that might comfort.

Christina arrived home late, half-apologetic, half angry that the two countries were now going to war and declaring that if the matter had been left to mothers there would be no war. He thought it odd to hear his wife talking of motherhood, but he did not say so. She had been consulting, no doubt, with her mother and therefore spoke with some authority. "What can we do about Angela?" she asked.

"I have to confess that the same question has crossed my mind and I am at a loss to know what the answer is, if there is one. I could go and talk to some of the people in the Ministries. I am not sure whether it should be the Home or Foreign Office and I expect they will be inundated with similar queries."

"That is no reason why not to try. Surely your father has some influence."

"Possibly. What will happen to enemy nationals who are here now, trapped in this country? I assume that we will arrest them and imprison them."

"Imprison?" said Christina, horrified. "Will Angela be imprisoned?"

"We will do it civilly and treat them properly, not as criminals."

"That is because we are civilised, and that is more than can be said for the Germans!"

"I would expect that she will be put under house arrest. It could be embarrassing for our friend to now find himself married to an English woman and with the countries at war. When you think about it, it does seem strange that he married her. Quite an error of judgement. It only makes sense if you assume that he believed we would never go to war."

"Nor should we," said Christina. "Perhaps they will lock him up for being married to a hostile alien. There would be some justice in that if they did."

"I doubt if we will be able to sell this flat, now. We should think about letting it, and moving to Bloomsbury."

"And what about Mark? If he returns, where is he to live?"

"We have bought the house," said Michael defensively. "If you do not like the thought of moving in because Mark may return, we could always go and live in Belgravia, or simply stay here."

"No," said Christina. "All this has taken such a long time and I am conditioned now to moving. I do not want to put it off. If we do, there is no knowing what will happen. We will move to Bloomsbury and Mama can go down to Newington. We will worry about Mark when, and if, he appears."

"I doubt that he will. Your secretary believes that the Germans are going to close the Atlantic and the Channel with submarines. Mark could have a pretty long stay in America."

"They would do that?"

"They did in the last war. They are probably out there now, taking up position."

Christina looked thoughtful for a moment. "There is no chance that we could lose, is there?" she said softly.

"Us? No chance."

"I mean, I would hate to end up on the losing side and with Herr von Cerny on the winning side."

“No chance. The Germans won't even get into France. They will be stopped at the border.” Even as he said it, he visualised a combined army of Germans, Austrians, Italians and Spaniards massed on the other side of the Channel, ready to cross. He could see them sweeping inland, across the Newington Estate. The cottage was going up in flames and they were over-running the gardens. “We must win,” he added emphatically.

“And you? You will take the position that Paul was talking about?”

“If I am asked, yes. I doubt if it will entail very much. I doubt if I will even get to the Continent.” He could see his team in the gardens, propping up the walls of the ruins, supporting arches, rebuilding fallen walls. Nothing could be of greater importance to their heritage.

“When I think of some of the dreadful things that Mark told us about.”

“It won't be like that. That was a civil war. They are far worse.”

“It just seems so unreal, impossible to believe, almost surrealistic. Perhaps it is all a dream and we will all wake up soon?”

“Perhaps,” said Michael.

“I understand that we have orders to move!”

“Michael looked down at the papers on his desk. “I haven't received any, not unless they are amongst this lot. I wish someone would sort them out or stop dumping them here when I am out.”

“It also sounds odd because it is said that things are going very bad out there. I heard it from Foster who is dating this WRAC who works in the C in C's office. I don't think there's much doubt about it. We are moving up.”

“I wish you wouldn't refer to it in that way. And it doesn't mean anything very much, anyway. I have lost time of the number of times we have moved, backwards and forwards. We are no nearer to going across than we were when we started.”

“This time it is the real thing.”

“What? The see-you-in-Berlin thing? Oh, well, you had better get all the men together and I'll give them some sort of briefing as soon as I get the orders confirming our orders.”

“I can't do that. Not all the men. They are not all here.”

“Not all here? Where the hell are they if they are not all here, especially if all of a sudden they are needed?”

“Henderson's wife is having a baby.”

“I know. The miraculous conception. How ever many does that make?”

“I think it is the same one as before, Sir. There's been some kind of problem.”

“They'll be some kind of problem if we do have to move and he is not here. Get him back!”

“And Maskell has gone AWOL again.”

“So send someone to find him, pronto!”

Once he was left alone Michael opened a drawer of the desk and took out the large folder he had placed there when the Captain had knocked on the door. For a while he stared at the top sheet of paper which was inscribed “A Treatise on English Churches from Wren to Sir Walter Morgan, 1660 - 1860”. Turning a page he read;

“The two hundred years between 1660 and 1860 were amongst the most important in the history of church building in England.”

Perhaps that was true. They were important years and many churches of distinction had been built during this period. Could he call it an epoch, an age when architecture had clearly influenced ecclesiastical building as never before? However, he could not find his dictionary to check on the word. “Peterson!” he called from the door. “Is there a dictionary out there?” He returned to his desk and waited, but neither Captain Peterson nor a dictionary appeared. He assumed that the officer had gone to send a telegram to Henderson. Perhaps his wife had delivered their new baby. At least they were getting one.

Michael had started working on the book on the day he was first posted, writing largely from memory although he was able to drive into Kings Lynn to pillage the second-hand book stores and examine the two magnificent churches there. True, they had been built before the epoch he had chosen for his subject and he found himself sorely tempted to extend his survey back simply to include these. For a while he resisted, then he concluded that Wren did not start in a vacuum and that he should have at least a chapter dealing with pre-1660 churches. So he looked at their grandeur, their decoration and fenestration, lamenting the loss of their stained glass which, he was sure, they had once possessed in great abundance.

He considered their size and proportions. In this connection he had a simple solution at hand. "I think the men need some experience in surveying and measuring up structures, Peterson," he announced. "We ought to be in a position to make drawings of the buildings we are required to rescue. We have to assume that records will have been destroyed by enemy action. I was thinking there's two fine churches in Lynn which is only twenty miles away. Get them together with all the necessary equipment and arrange some transport, and we'll go and survey them. We will start at 14.00 hours. I make it 09.59."

"Measuring up, Major? And drawing?"

"Yes, Peterson. Measuring up and drawing. You know, plans and elevations. I we are to save and preserve all these buildings we must know what their dimensions are."

"We must? I thought we would be just propping up and replacing the odd brick or stone to keep things stable, just as we have done up at the Abbey."

"Nonsense. Of course we must be able to determine how large things are. Get on with it, Peterson."

His book had grown in size, gradually at first, but rapidly latterly because Michael had gained access to the private library of a nearby vicar where he found a remarkable book which purported to have photographs of all the churches of England and Wales. What an undertaking! To be able to travel around and visit all these churches! The vicar said that the book had been out of print for a long time, and he doubted that all the photographs had been taken by the same person. He might pick up a copy in Lynn, but Michael had not been able to.

The book had become his obsession. He found that he thought of it day and night, wrote passages when ever he had a spare moment and often when the moments were not spare. He carried a note book everywhere and even took to writing on scraps of paper which he placed in a loose file for future reference. When he could, he would dart off to visit local churches over quite a wide area and had become quite an authority on those of East Anglia and the South East Midlands.

All this would be threatened if Peterson was right and they were about to move up. He would lose access to the vicar's library and probably be forced to discontinue his writing. He could still make notes, but he had to take precautions as far as the opus magnum was concerned. So, sadly, he bundled up all his papers and wrapped them in brown paper, tying them firmly and addressed the package to Christina at the Bloomsbury address. She would look after them for him.

"Peterson? Is that you?" he called. "Ah, you're back. I wanted you earlier for something but I have forgotten what it was. Get someone to drive down to the village and post this parcel, would you?"

"What is it?" asked the Captain, eyeing the parcel with some suspicion, no doubt wondering where and how the Major had come by some brown paper.

"Some personal papers that I am sending home to my wife as I won't be able to take them with me where we are going, assuming that we are going. You are not going to tell me that it is against some regulation or another! Just get it done. I would go but I had better wait here for these orders."

"You have mentioned - "

"I haven't said anything. I haven't even put a note in for my wife." Christina would know that something was afoot when she received the papers. In a way, it served a dual purpose, sending them to her.

“Do you think I look smart in uniform?” he had asked her.

“No,” she replied.

“Don't you like men in uniform?”

“No. I don't like men.”

“So you don't like me?”

Christina snorted. “I never think about it,” she said. “We are married. That is enough.”

A head appeared around the door to the office. “Those orders,” it said.

“I haven't received any orders,” complained Michael.

“The orders, when you receive them - its off!”

“Off?”

“The orders - ignore them. Send them back. Fresh orders will be issued countermanding the first orders. You are to follow the second orders, not the first.”

“If I haven't received either, how will I know which are the first and which are the second?”

“You will know,” said the young woman and withdrew her head.

“It is off,” Michael told Captain Peterson when he returned.

“What is?”

“What ever it was that was on. You know, the orders you were talking about earlier, that Foster found out about. The C in C's APC has just been here.”

“So we are not going after all? Just as I've telegraphed Henderson and sent out a search party for Maskall. Well, you instructed me to do it. I shall say that at the Court Martial. I was just following orders. What am I to do with them all once we've got them all together again? We have measured up every church for miles around. The men asked if they could start on public houses.”

“I do not think that licensed premises have much architectural merits. What are you to do with them? We had better practice some more Emergency Stability Restoration procedures.”

“More ESR? Back to the Abbey?”

“Yes. Shall we say tomorrow at 09.30 hours?”

“Henderson won't be back by then.”

“Make it 09.30 hours on the day after tomorrow, then. And make sure that they take all the equipment.”

Michael stood under a small vaulted roof and watched the rain driving down. It was one of the few sheltered areas left in the ruins. The drawback of standing there was that he could not see what was going on, not that he really wanted to. He relied upon Captain Peterson's infrequent progress reports. He surmised that he was just off the west aisle of the chapel, standing in an opening in one of the main walls which led, originally, to the cloisters. Little of these remained other than the rectangle of paving which was glistening as the water ran across it. Behind him a large damp patch was seeping its way down the east wall below the line of ivy.

Standing there, he could not help thinking of the ruins of the Monastery at Newington and of the happy hours he had spent there. It now all seemed so far away and long ago and he could barely remember the size and extent of the remaining stonework. The Newington chapel was, surely, smaller than this, possibly because of the difficulty in getting the materials there in the first place. How much would locally difficulties have influenced the size and design of churches? He was thinking that the Monastery chapel at Newington was probably in about the same state of preservation as this one when there was a dull thud. A few minutes later Captain Peterson came running up, flushed and excited.

“Another arch?” asked Michael.

“Yes!” said Peterson, gasping for breath.

“That is the third since we began! We are suppose to be saving and protecting these buildings, not demolishing them. We can rely on the rest of the Army to do that. Any

casualties?"

"Branson has a broken leg, I think, and Cooper has sprained his wrist."

"How did it happen?"

"Cooper was on the scaffold and jacking. I suppose the rain had weakened the ground because the arch suddenly gave way and fell sideways, bringing down a stretch of wall with it."

"On top of Cooper and Branson?"

"Not exactly. As the arch went Cooper jumped and landed on Branson."

"I see. So I will get another wiggling from the C in C whilst those two creep off to see the MO. It sounds perfectly reasonable to me, doesn't it to you?"

"Well - ."

"Well, I will tell you what they will do, that is those of our men who have survived to do anything. Starting tomorrow, they can start rebuilding the wall that fell, then the arch, and then they can go on to re-erect the other two arches."

"It isn't one of our duties, actually restoring buildings," said Captain Peterson.

"It isn't our job to knock them down, either. I want them put back stone by stone, and the right stones in the right places, too. Burrows and McMahon claim to be stonemasons. Let's see them at work. You can organise all the materials."

"What do I do when I am asked why I need sand and cement?"

"Simply tell the truth. We have been testing stone arches to the limit of their integrity and we now need to re-assemble them before we re-commence. You can say that some reconstruction work will always be necessary in order to secure the stability of a building. Say anything, but get the materials!"

"Damned poor show, Bernstein, this business with Branson and Cooper."

"Yes, Sir. It was unfortunate but shell or bomb damaged buildings are likely to be as precarious, if not more, and my team need to learn to appreciate the dangers that are inherent in dealing with them."

"By direct experience? We don't usually use live ammunition on our own men, you know."

"That may be so, Sir, but it is better that they learn here rather than close to enemy lines."

"Just so, just so. But try and keep the casualties to a minimum. Looks bad on the returns. Lets the side down. Be a good chap and try and get some civilians involved and injure them. No need to report civilian injuries."

"I'll try, sir," said Michael."

"I must say it was a good idea to get them out of camp and doing something at this ruin of yours. Lowered moral having your chaps lolling about everywhere. Keep them up there, Bernstein, until we get the order to send you lot out. I don't want to see them lolling around here. Understand?"

"I am to keep my men occupied and out of the camp?"

"That's it! Make it so."

"The men have finished the arch and the wall," announced Captain Peterson, triumphantly. "Do you want to come and see it? Of course, we cannot strike the shuttering until the mortar hardens, but it is rather an improvement on what was there before."

Michael stopped writing notes on churches and sighed, wondering what on earth they could have done. When he arrived at the location he was pleasantly pleased. So were his men. "Isn't it somewhat higher than before?" he asked, shielding his eyes as he looked up.

"We have taken the surmounting wall right up to its original level. There may have been an arcade higher, but it will be a proper test of the load bearing characteristics of the rebuilt arch. Look, you can see a mark up there where the parapet use to meet the tower. And we've inserted all the corbels for the roof beams, there and there," said Captain Peterson. "They appeared to be missing. And if you come through - "

"You appear to have replaced the gargoyles," observed Michael.

“Yes. It’s Branson and Cooper. McMahon did it. Apparently he is very good at this sort of thing. Rather appropriate I would say.”

“It does look like new. It is very impressive. You can tell the men I said so. And you can tell them that once the mortar has set, they can practice underpinning and supporting it.”

“There's just one snag,” said Captain Peterson. “There was going to be a deputation to see you, but I headed them off and said I would raise the matter with you myself.”

“What matter? If it is going back to spend the days in the camp they can forget it. The C in C wants us out of the camp.”

“Does he?”

“He does. Something about moral.”

“No, it wasn't that.”

“What then?” demanded Michael, studying the gargoyles.

“It seems that now they've put it up, they don't want to knock it down again, even accidentally.”

“Yes,” said Michael reflectively. “It would seem a shame. Get them to put the second arch back, then. They can practise on that.”

“We have found out why the arches fell over,” announced Captain Peterson.

“I was trying to work out how to get a camera and some film,” said Michael, ignoring him.

“Camera? Film? Why?”

“I thought I would start photographing the local churches for my thesis. It is difficult in war-time, but it is something I could get under way whilst we are stuck here and you are knocking down and putting up arches, if only I could get the equipment. Come to think of it, we ought to have a camera as part of our equipment so that we can record the state of buildings before we start on them.”

“In case they fall down? I was going to tell you about the arches.”

“Would you look into it, fill out a requisition or something. I'll sign it. Why did the arches fall down? Nothing to do with Joshua, was it?”

“It is quite simple. Originally they were buttressed and some moron has removed the buttresses. Probably some local thieving farmers to build pig sties. McMahon reckons if we put them back, the arches will be less likely to topple when we support them.”

“Good! The men can practice at supporting both buttresses and arches. Now, about the camera and film?”

“I will speak to Foster. He can fix anything.”

“There aren't any important buildings in Egypt, are there?”

Michael stared up at Captain Peterson. “Only one or two. Why do you ask?”

“The Third Battalion is being kitted up for tropical duty and the rumour is that they are being sent to North Africa, which means Cairo.”

“And?”

“We could follow.”

“I would doubt it. There really is very little out there for us apart from a lot of sand. There's a few mosques and Coptic churches, and a couple of large pyramids which I would have thought would have been beyond our resources to support.”

“I have heard of those,” said Peterson enthusiastically. “It sounds like the very place for us!”

“I doubt if we'd be called upon to do anything out there. Sorry to disappoint you. How are you getting on with the camera and film?”

“Foster is working on it.”

“And the arches and buttresses?”

“The men are working on those.”

“What is it now, Peterson?” said Michael wearily, pausing from his writing and laying down his pen. “I am working on a particularly difficult section and it doesn't help to have you passing in and out all the time. If it is about Cairo, I haven't heard a thing.”

“Here!” said the Captain, placing a map and a small box on the desk before Michael and covering his work.

“What is it?”

“It is a 35mm Leica and several cassettes of black and white film. Coloured is far more difficult to come by. It is MOD stock so it should be all right. Foster says it is the same film that the RAF use for reconnaissance flights. Apparently there's tons of it about if you know the right place to look.”

“But this is a German camera! What are people going to say if I walk around photographing with a German camera? It will arouse enough curiosity just going out photographing without this.”

“Small format English cameras are hard to come by and Foster said that the size of camera was determined by the availability of the film.”

“And what is the map for?”

“Ah! Now that is even better. Foster found out that the RAF are practising low level phot-reconnaissance flying over selected targets. The idea is they swoop in with something like a Mosquito, click, and they are off again before the ground forces get to realise what is going on.”

“And?”

“And, they are willing to target your churches. If you will mark them on the map they will swoop in and photograph them from the air. In fact they were rather pleased at the thought of having targets set for them. So it suits them and you will end up with a nice collection of aerial shots.”

“The men have completed the third arch and the buttresses. Do you want to come out to see them? You really ought to.”

Michael was thrown about as he sat in the back of the Jeep. “This track has got a lot worse,” he shouted to Captain Peterson as it lurched and pitched. “There must have been some heavy equipment moved along here.”

“Perhaps the Army has been up here on manoeuvres?” Peterson shouted back. “You’ll see,” he added when they had arrived at the Abbey site and Michael commenced his inspection, “we now have the five arches on this side fully restored up to their full height. It would seem a shame not to renovate the other side and raise the wall to parapet level. It wouldn't take long and if we are not going to North Africa we will need something to keep the men occupied. We can get the materials and it would give us more practice in erecting scaffolding, temporary supporting, and replacing damaged materials.”

“I see that there are more gargoyles.”

“Some of the rest of the troop are there.”

“I cannot see McMahan amongst them.”

“No. He says he has to go up last, to sign off the work. It is some kind of family tradition or superstition. He cannot sign off the work until it is complete.”

“So, he assumed that I would agree to the renovation of the other side? All right, Peterson, tell them to get on with it.”

“I hear that the RAF have bombed the church at Swotham.” Captain Peterson nodded and gulped his drink. “What happened?” Michael hissed. “How on earth could they do that?”

“Pressed the wrong button.”

“Pressed the wrong button? I thought these were unarmed reconnaissance planes, not bombers?”

“It appears they have been using fighter-bombers with cameras fitted to them. I suppose the idea is that they could combine the functions.”

“That sort of thing is hardly likely to go unnoticed by the enemy. They might miss the click of a shutter, but they are hardly likely to miss a bomb going off!”

“Anyway, it seems that the plane was carrying couple of live bombs and the pilot simply pressed the wrong button on his approach. Apparently they are side by side in the cockpit, these buttons. And he scored two direct hits.”

“Any casualties?”

“No. The pilot is all right.”

“I suppose this is the end of the photo reconnaissance runs? It will be back to the German camera?”

Captain Peterson shook his head. “Not at all,” he said. “Actually the RAF are rather pleased at the accuracy and there's now talk of putting together a high precision low level specialist bombing squadron. I expect there's a little bad feeling in Swotham but there's plenty of churches around there.”

“And we could always send the men up to rebuild it, except we are not supposed to be trying to save buildings that have been completely demolished. It has been, hasn't it?”

“Pretty much so at the tower end. I suppose that we could go over and put in a few props and timbers, and that sort of thing.”

“It would seem to be good public relations if we were to do something like that,” said Michael brightly. “And it would make a change from the arches for the men. Yes, let's do it, but nothing too elaborate. We don't want to arouse civilian expectations.”

“I will get straight on to it,” said Captain Peterson, heading towards the door.

“Oh, Peterson. One other thing. The church at Swotham was a fairly early one. The RAF did photograph it before they blew it up?”

“As far as I know, yes.”

“Good,” said Michael, and returned to his writing.