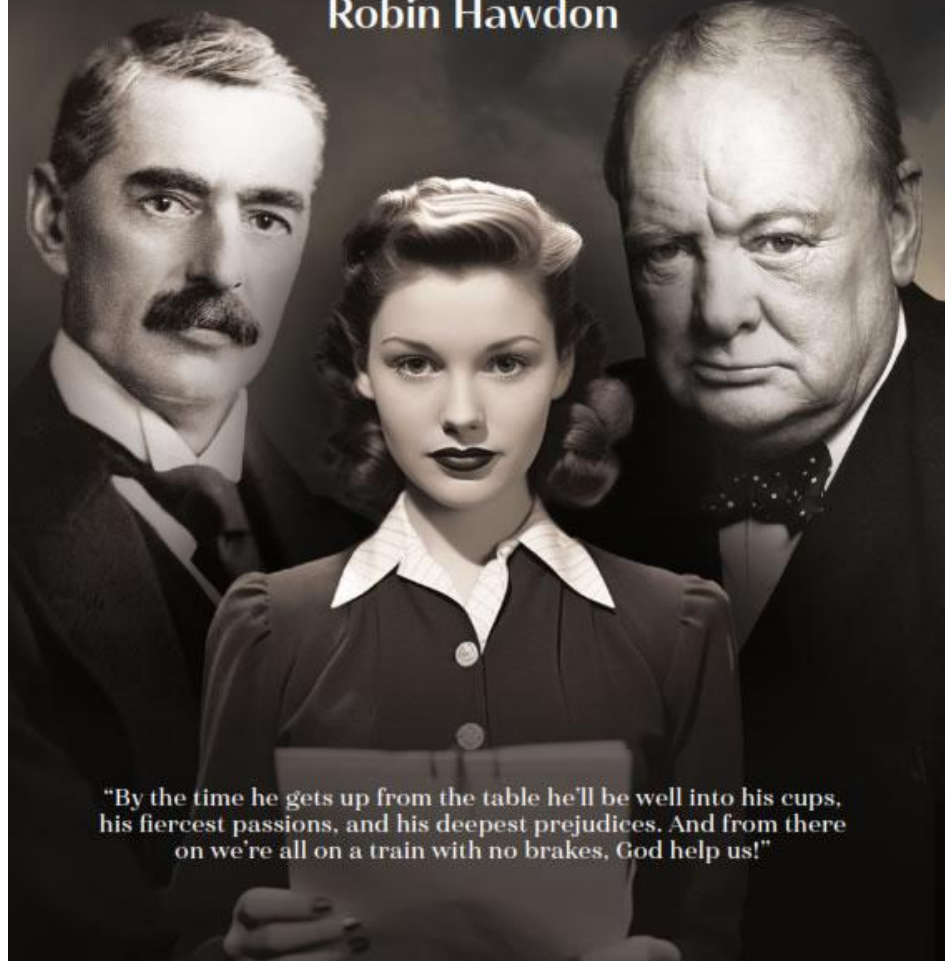


# DINNER WITH CHURCHILL

Robin Hawdon



"By the time he gets up from the table he'll be well into his cups, his fiercest passions, and his deepest prejudices. And from there on we're all on a train with no brakes. God help us!"

DINNER WITH  
CHURCHILL

A novel

Robin Hawdon

This story is largely about bravery. It is dedicated to my wife, who is the bravest of the brave.

*It is on historical record that, on the evening of October 13th 1939, six weeks after war had been declared on Hitler's Germany, Winston Churchill and Neville Chamberlain, implacable opponents for years over the appeasement issue, met together with their two wives, Clementine and Anne, for a private dinner at Admiralty House, an event which caused ripples throughout Westminster..*

*Chamberlain was still Prime Minister, but had seen all his efforts to negotiate peace with Hitler shattered. Churchill had been recalled to the cabinet after ten years 'in the wilderness', his dire warnings of the Nazi threat vindicated.*

*It was the first and only time the four ever met socially alone together. There is no record as to what transpired during that unique evening.*

# CHAPTER 1

She was a child of the English Lake District. A place where one lives permanently in the shadow of the mountains and the depths of the waters. Such people are doomed to exist with disappointment for the remainder of their lives. Nowhere else on earth compares. Nowhere presents one with such intimate grandeur, such beauty, such ferocity. Nowhere faces one with such jubilation in the joy of the world, and such despair at its cataclysms. Whether one realises it or not, one is on an eternal quest to recapture greatness in life.

At her age of course she never considered such thoughts, not until years later. At the age of sixteen, when virtually all you have known has been the glowering magnificence of the mountains across the lake, and the equal magnificence of the cumulus clouds above, threatening yet more tumultuous rain and wind, you do not analyse your feelings. You simply accept that all such daunting splendour is your due and your inheritance. It is in your bones.

At the age of sixteen all you are interested in is love, and laughter, and the breaking of rules.

Not that Lucy appeared on first encounter to be concerned with any of those things. Few noticed her as they passed by. The villagers knew her well enough, as they knew everyone for miles about in those days, but they never thought of her as anyone other than a familiar teenager amongst all the others who went to the local grammar school, a bus ride away around the lake. If they referred to her at all, it was usually as 'that sweet young baker's daughter', or 'that shy little Armitage girl.'

She wasn't actually little, standing five and a half feet in her stockings, but she gave the appearance of being so, merging into the background as she was so adept at doing. It was only on the hockey pitch or playing basketball in the school gym that she

shone, which earned her a modicum of respect amongst her peers, but even they paid her little attention away from those arenas. Like many adolescent teenagers, she was uncertain of her being, unconfident of her personality. The embers of a fire glowed somewhere deep inside her, but they were far from bursting into flame.

Her older brother, Tom, on the other hand, was always noticeable. He stood not far short of six feet, and his broad shoulders, craggy features, and affable smile made him a centre of attention in most companies. Tom had no such inhibitions about putting himself forward, and, on the surface at least, seemed utterly assured of his future and his ambitions. Tom was Lucy's hero, especially as he looked on her as his charge, to be protected against all threats, real and imaginary. The affection between them was one of the guiding lights in Lucy's life.

Another was Tom's best friend, Henry Collins. Henry was almost as impressively built as Tom, and certainly prettier in aspect, with his waving dark hair and wide brown eyes which invited intimacy whenever they engaged with others. It was Henry who first awakened the sexuality in Lucy, for such stirrings came late in young womens' breasts way back in those repressed years between the wars. The stigma of lustful sin, and the hideous threat of unwanted pregnancy was taught in every home and classroom, and thundered from every pulpit in those days. Country lasses especially - who were all too aware of the fecundity amongst the farm animals everywhere about them - were forever wary of the attentions of the opposite sex.

As it was, an early summer evening arrived when the pair found themselves alone together outside the village hall, during a rare birthday party of one of their classmates whose parents had hosted the do. Live music had gladdened the event, and beer and cider had been available in rather unwise quantities. June had been wet and warm, but this evening was pleasantly dry, and the heavens sparkled in their black vault above the peaks. Lucy, as usual a little intimidated by the revelry around her, had wandered out to sit on

one of the benches overlooking the lake. She was unaware of Henry's approach until he was sitting beside her.

'Running away from the mob again, Lucy?' he said in his deep voice with its slight Cumberland lilt.

She nodded. Henry, through long acquaintance, was one of the few beings outside her close family with whom she could feel relaxed.

'Bit noisy for me.'

He nodded back at the hall. 'Didn't see you dancing much. None of the lads to your taste?'

She pursed her lips. 'All too familiar, and too tipsy for my liking.'

'Ah, Lucy - when are you going to let your hair down?'

She fingered her straight dark tresses, which were down to her shoulders for the occasion. Thirties Hollywood waves and curls had not yet reached the rural North of England.

'It's down as far as it'll go.'

'You know what I mean.' He put his arm round her in fraternal affection. 'You'd be such a pretty girl if you let yourself.'

'What d'you mean?'

'You know. Open up a bit.'

She was silent. He stared up at the heavens. The half-moon cut a shimmering slice of silver across the black waters of the lake. 'Nice night. Wish it was always like this here.'

'I quite like the rain.'

'In small doses.' He drew back and looked at her. She felt uneasy under his gaze.

'How often you been kissed?' he asked casually.

She blinked her eyelashes at him. 'A few times.' It was a very few actually, but she didn't elaborate.

'That's a shame. Let's make it one more.' And he leant forward and kissed her gently. 'That was nice,' he said, and kissed her again.

She didn't resist, although it was such a surprise coming from him. But then he compounded it by slipping a hand into the top of her party dress, and before she was aware of what was happening had cupped her breast in his palm.

She jolted then in surprise, and without thinking slapped him hard on the cheek.

'Wo!' he exclaimed, and withdrew his hand, laughing. 'Sorry. Didn't mean to take you by surprise.'

'Is that what you do every time you kiss a girl?' she asked, eyes flashing.

'Only the ones who have a nice kiss,' he said, nursing his cheek.

'I didn't take you for a seducer, Henry Collins.' She was indignant, but at the same time aware that the feel of his large warm hand on such an intimate part of her had not been unpleasant. 'That's how Amy Little got pregnant.'

He chuckled again. 'Amy Little is a tart. And you don't get pregnant by having your titties touched.'

They were both quiet again. She was assimilating the novel feelings churning inside. What he was thinking she had no idea.

Then he said, 'What d'you think you'll be doing with yourself, Lucy, when you leave school?'

She was taken aback by the question. It would be at least a year before that happened, and in any case it was not often asked of girls then. They were generally expected to seek out an eligible male, get married in good time, and join the production line creating babies - preferably boy babies since the devastation of the male population by the Great War was still in people's minds. The idea of taking a different course was only considered by the minority, and a vaguely suspect minority at that.

'What do you mean, doing with myself?'

'Well, you're a bright girl. You could have a career. A lot of women doing that now. Or are you just thinking of taking over the bakery business?'



She was again silent for several moments. To tell truth she had hardly contemplated the possibility. Although she helped out at the bakery in the early mornings and at weekends, she had always assumed her brother would inherit the business one far-off day when their parents retired from the relentless task of feeding the local population. And as to other possibilities, ambition had not pointed her in any such direction.

'I don't know,' she said. 'Haven't really thought about it.'

'You should do.'

'Why?'

'There are going to be a lot of opportunities for women in the future. Jobs in the cities and all round the empire.'

'The empire?' It was a commonly used term for the vast federation that spanned the globe. She had never considered its potentials, except as spreading pink areas on the geography lessons maps.

'Canada, Australia, South Africa - they're all crying out for qualified people to come and work there. Even India. Think of the adventures.'

'Is that what you're thinking of?'

'Maybe. Not sure yet. There could soon be another war coming. That'll change things.'

'Another war?'

'That's what they're saying.'

She was so ignorant of political affairs. 'Surely not. That would be terrible.'

'It's what the papers are saying. Adolf Hitler's getting too big for his boots. Anyway, that will bring more chances for women. They'll be needed to fill the gaps if the men are off fighting.'

Something opened in Lucy's mind, a small window to a wider horizon. 'Will that really change things?'

'Of course. For everyone.' He brushed a lock of his thick hair back from his eyes. 'Tommy and me are thinking of joining the

army actually.'

She turned her head and stared at him. 'Lord, Henry - why would you want to do that?'

He shrugged. 'It's a good career, the army. And if there's a war we'd probably be called up anyway, so it'd be clever to get ahead of the pack.'

'But you...? I mean, why...?' She did not know how to respond. This new scenario was too big to be absorbed.

A voice came from behind. 'What are you two doing, sneaking off from the do?' Her brother Tom appeared, beer glass in hand, and stood beside the bench, his substantial figure outlined against the night.

'Just talking,' replied Henry. 'Discussing how girls get pregnant.'

'Oh, that.' Tom sat next to Lucy on the bench. 'One of the mysteries of the world, that. Don't tell Lucy. She might never recover from the shock.'

She punched him in the chest. 'Don't be a ninny.'

'Well, there could well be a few cases after tonight,' he said, taking a swig from his beer. 'It's getting quite steamy back there. A lot of girlfriend swapping going on.'

'Who?' asked Henry. 'Anyone chasing your Jenny?'

Jenny Conway had been Tom's unofficial girlfriend for six months or so. A pretty, fair-headed girl with green eyes and an infectious laugh, who was in his sixth form class at school and would also be leaving later that year. Lucy could see why Tom was attracted to her, and doubtless the feeling of breasts, and conceivably even more than breasts, was part of the arrangement, but she didn't like to picture such things. She wasn't sure how intelligent Jenny was. She didn't think it would last, but she would never say so to her revered brother.

'Oh, she's flirting with George Smithers,' Tom was saying. 'But then she's always flirting with someone. If you could get pregnant by flirting she'd have triplets by now.'

Henry laughed, but Lucy had more serious things on her mind. 'Is it true you're thinking of joining the army, Tommy?'

He glanced at his friend. 'What have you been saying, Henry?'

'Just mentioned it. We were talking careers.'

'Are you serious about it?' she asked.

He stared into his glass. 'Just considering it.'

'Have you told Mum and Dad?'

'No. And don't you either. It'd cause a scene. Haven't made up our minds yet, have we Henry?'

'No.'

'But what...? I mean, what would happen to the bakery?' Tom often helped with deliveries from the shop, unofficially driving its rattling Ford van around the various outlying cafés and hotels.

'What d'you mean, what would happen? It'll go on as always. Mum and Dad and you can handle it. Bring in people from the village at peak times like always.' He threw her a glance. 'I certainly don't intend to end up as a baker.'

'What's wrong with that? Good enough for Dad and his dad.'

'Not for me. Serving buns and pork pies to tourists and the greedy folk of the Lakes for the rest of my life is not my idea of fulfilment.'

'I thought you were going to try for university.'

'Might still. Depends on how things go.'

The sound of music and laughter spilled from the hall behind them.

'Well,' said Henry, rising from the bench. 'Better get back to the fight. See if there's anyone left for me to have a jig with.'

'Go for it,' said Tom. 'Just don't get her pregnant.'

Lucy punched him again, as Henry left and sauntered back towards the party.

## CHAPTER 2

The bakery was a long low extension to the Armitage home, itself a three bedroomed cottage set on the fringe of the village behind a sheep-dotted field stretching down to the lake shore. The building was probably over two hundred years old - no one knew for certain - and, built as it was of solid granite slabs and slate roof, would likely last for another two hundred. Little had changed during that time, except for the replacement of window frames and oak front door, and the addition of a modern bathroom tacked on at the back. The bakery itself, once just an adjoining animal shed, was the largest room in the whole place. The ovens were ranged along the back wall, shelves along the sides, and a long timber counter splitting the area in two - work space behind, customer space before. Its output was prodigious, ranging from loaves of various shapes and sizes, to buns, scones, Eccles cakes, pies, and even the occasional specially commissioned decorated cake for birthdays and anniversaries. The former were turned out in their daily dozens, the latter were rare, since the nation was just recovering from its post-war austerities, and both money and exotic ingredients were hard to come by.

In winter the shop was a favourite meeting place for folk from far around, since the roaring ovens made it the warmest place in the village. In summer, the opposite prevailed, when customers dashed in and out as hastily as possible to escape the oppressive heat. Lucy's father, Fred Armitage, reigned stolidly over his small domain in all temperatures and all weathers. People said that his amply upholstered form insulated him from such, but his ruddy features betrayed their exposure to decades of fires and vapours, and he carried with him a permanent fragrance of freshly grounded flour.

Her mother too, although built on slighter dimensions, was a

regular custodian of the shop counter, and adviser on all things wheaten. The pair knew everyone in the village and beyond. Fred was a gruff, taciturn character who disdained small talk, but his wife Minnie was a petite bundle of congeniality. She was confidante and commiserater to all and sundry, and there was very little of local gossip that she did not know about.

Lucy herself helped at the early morning baking sessions virtually every day before going to school, and assisted with the baking and delivering at weekends. In holiday periods, when the tourists and fell walkers flooded into the legendary neighbourhood, demand for produce was high amongst the local cafés and guest houses, and the bakery was at full stretch. It was a thriving business.

It was two days after the party, early on the Monday morning, that found Lucy in her usual place beside her father, wearing her apron and thick oven gloves, taking the trays of freshly baked loaves to the various shelves as he shovelled them from the brick ovens. She and her mother chatted as they worked, whilst her father rolled, pounded and heaved, and muttered instructions to himself. It was then that Lucy made the error that dogged her for a long time after.

'Did you know Tommy was thinking of joining the army, Ma? What d'you think of that?'

Both parents stopped what they were doing and stared at her.

'What?' growled her father.

'The army?' said her mother. 'When did he tell you that?'

Their looks of dismay warned Lucy, and she remembered too late her brother's instruction to keep it a secret.

'Oh. I shouldn't have said. It was just a vague idea between him and Henry.'

'When did he say that?' demanded Fred. Lucy adored her father, but rather at a distance. She was ever a little in awe of his sharp temper and definitive political views, and their relationship was a delicate one.

'The other night, at the party. I don't think they were serious.'

'They better not be.' Her parents exchanged glances. 'Not the place to be for a bright lad.'

'Isn't it?'

'Not any more. Not just swanning around playing in bands in smart uniforms these days. You're just cannon fodder.' Fred Armitage's two elder brothers had both been killed in the Great War, one at Passchendaele, the other at the Somme. His own parents had never recovered from their grief.

'Is there another war coming then?' Lucy asked, as she arranged a tray load of wholemeal buns along a cooling shelf.

There was no immediate answer. She turned to her mother with raised eyebrows. At that moment the shop door pinged, and old Mrs Tomlinson, the ex-postmistress entered. She was an early riser and invariably one the first customers to arrive.

Minnie Armitage turned to serve her, saying, 'Is there going to be another war, Ada? What do you think?'

The old woman, well into her seventies now, but still alert, said, 'It's what they're sayin'. Can't credit it, can you, God help us. Not after the last lot.' Ada too had lost a son in the trenches. 'But Winston's bin bellerin' again about rearming.'

Fred growled from the ovens. 'He's always belling about rearming. He's as bad as Hitler. Needs to keep his mouth shut. Pair of warmongers, both of 'em.'

The name of Winston Churchill had provoked fiercely divided opinions across the land for several decades.

Lucy's mother sighed. 'Well, I don't know. I sometimes think the world is mad. The usual, Ada?'

'Small loaf and three of your Eccles cakes, please, Minnie. And get ready to do a million pork pies for the troops.' Ada cackled then, and the atmosphere lightened. She glanced at Lucy, who had been listening to the exchange. 'And what about you, young Lucy? Fancy yourself in nurse's uniform lookin' after all the young men, eh?'

Lucy smiled shyly. 'I hope it doesn't happen.'

'Ay well, that's what we all hope. Meanwhile you just look to your lessons. We need smart young women these days.' And she gathered her purchases and waddled off to her tiny cottage in the high street, which she and previous generations had occupied for most of their lives.

Fred dumped another tray of loaves onto the work surface. 'I need to have a word with that son of mine,' he muttered.

'Don't be cross with him, Dad,' said Lucy, conscience-stricken. 'It wasn't serious. I shouldn't have said anything.'

But, serious or not, it caused a storm later that day. She was back from school and changing out of her uniform up in her small bedroom with its serene views across the lake, when she heard the shouting going on downstairs. She couldn't make out the words, but her father's and brother's voices were clear enough in fierce altercation, with her mother's softer tones intervening spasmodically in an effort to keep the peace.

Lucy herself couped the aftermath before supper, when she came down to the kitchen and found Tom there.

'Thanks, Lucy. Really landed me in it there,' he growled as he threw cutlery onto the table.

'Sorry, Tommy. It just slipped out. I didn't mean to tell them.'

'Caused one hell of a row, and they're not done yet, damn you.'

A tear gathered in the corner of her eye. 'I'm sorry.' She brushed it away, took some dishes from the dresser and helped him set the table. 'Would it be such a bad thing, you joining the army?'

He banged down a jug of water. 'Dad thinks so. You've heard him talk about the last war. But it's not a bad career, especially if you make officer's rank. You have responsibilities, you get to travel around the country. Maybe abroad. There's British soldiers in every corner of the empire.'

'Would you like to go abroad?'

'Course I would. See the world. Who wouldn't?'

'There are scary places.'

'Oh, Lucy, don't be so timid. There's more to life than baking buns. And next time keep your blurry mouth shut.'

There was a sullen silence over supper that evening. It extended for several days, occasionally erupting into more arguments. Tom took to staying out of the way as much as possible, and Lucy withdrew into her shell. The seams of the tightly bonded Armitage household were splitting a little.

She did not see Henry Collins again for a couple of days. Then one morning he stopped her as they were passing each other in the school corridor.

'Tommy and me are catching the bus into Keswick on Saturday to go to the cinema. He's bringing Jenny. Why don't you come?'

She hesitated. She loved the cinema, but she was wary of his intentions.

'I'll see,' she said, and went on to her classroom, heart beating a little bit faster.

Later, back home, she said to her brother, 'Henry's asked me if I want to come with you to the cinema on Saturday.'

'Yes,' he said. 'He asked me if I minded.'

'What's the film?'

' "All Quiet On The Western Front." '

'Isn't that a war film?'

'That's why we want to see it. See what it's like being in the army. Supposed to be the best war film ever, but we were all too young to watch it when it came out. They're having a special showing.' He shrugged. 'It's probably not a girlie sort of thing.' He stole a sideways look at her. 'Do you want to come?'

'Maybe. You're bringing Jenny?'

'Yeh. We'd make a foursome.' He added, 'Mum and Dad won't mind if you're with us.'

'I'll see.'



She was playing reluctant, but she knew in her heart that she would go. There was a small flutter in the back of her mind for the rest of the week.

When Saturday came, the four of them boarded the bus after lunch, and it wound its way through the country lane, with the glowering heights of Helvellyn on one side and the long, lazy stretch of Thirlmere on the other, to the largest town in the Lakes.

They were lucky to get cinema seats. The Alhambra was one of the earliest picture houses in the country, and the golden age of cinema ensured that it was regularly filled, especially on weekends and rainy days. This was a weekend, and the weather cloudy, but they got into the queue relatively early and were able to get four seats some way back in the stalls. Half of Keswick was crowded in, and the place buzzed with chatter.

It was the era, not only of remarkable film making, but also of newsreels reporting the world's affairs, and of cartoons and short comedy items, all crammed into a single programme. A visit to the cinema was a major entertainment event.

Lucy sat beside Henry with her view of the screen partly obscured by the massed heads in front, and the familiar anticipation bubbling inside her. The fare that day was the usual Gaumont British News - pulsating with stories of the Duke of Windsor on honeymoon with his newly married wife, Mrs Simpson, and with Germany's continued buildup of armaments. It was followed by a Bugs Bunny cartoon, and a Charlie Chaplin short. Finally came the main feature.

Nearly two hours later the foursome came out of the cinema and made their way worldlessly down to their favourite café. They found a corner cubicle and ordered its speciality, 'Sos'n'mash' - pork sausages, mashed potatoes, and gravy that looked like melted chocolate.

Jenny was the first to speak, her green eyes clouded. 'I don't ever want to see a film like that again.'

The boys remained silent. Lucy said, 'It was horrible. Those

poor men.'

Certainly the film had portrayed the horrors of war with graphic realism. The indescribable squalor of life in the waterlogged trenches, the pointless slaughter of young manhood marching into the machine guns' hail, the desecration of entire landscapes. It had been almost unendurable to watch. The two boys, almost men themselves, glanced at each other but said nothing.

Lucy looked at her brother. 'Surely you're not going to join up after seeing that?'

He stared down at the table top. 'It's not like that now. They'll never fight wars like that again.'

'How do you know? How else can they fight them?'

'Future wars will be fought with tanks, and artillery, and planes. They'll never do those suicidal full front attacks again. There was too much criticism of High Command after all that.'

'Even so...'

Tom took a deep breath. 'I dunno, Luce. I mean, you more or less have to, don't you? How else do you stop evil people taking over the world?'

'It doesn't mean *you* have to. There's lots you can do to help. Bakers and farmers and... all sorts of people are needed to keep the country going without having to go away and fight.' She looked at Henry, who was also contemplating the wooden table top. 'What do you say, Henry?'

He looked up. 'Someone has to fight.'

'But why you? And why join up now? There isn't even a war yet.'

He shrugged and said nothing.

Jenny chipped in. 'You boys. You just like the idea of fighting. It's the whole stupid manly thing.'

Henry glowered. 'No, it's not. It's much more than that.'

'How? Why? What else is it?'

'It's... well, it's defending your country. It's...'

'You shouldn't have to defend it. Countries shouldn't be attacking other countries.'

'Of course not, but... they do.'

Her voice became more strident. 'It's all because of bloody men trying to prove how tough they are. When will they ever stop?'

Lucy looked at her brother. 'Is that what it is, Tommy?'

He stared out of the café window at the busy street outside. 'No, it's not that.'

'What is it then?'

'It's king and country, isn't it? It has to be king and country.'