

Beside the Golden Door

by Ian Watson

Parallel History. 80,000 words.

“Beside the Golden Door” is based on the early life of Sir Winston Churchill and is a fictional account of his escape from a South African prisoner-of-war camp in December of 1899 during the Anglo-Boer War. The story disputes the official reports of the time and in my version I have made his escape by bicycle.

Winston Churchill is the war correspondent for the London Morning Post. His two rescuers are 'Apollo' and 'Hermes', private soldiers who rescue him from captivity in Pretoria, and whisk him across Africa to freedom. Other characters are members of the Medallion Society who operate an escape route or underground railway, and a mysterious baseball team of African Americans.

Apollo and Hermes are ‘honorary Americans’ (former troopers in Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders). They are, apparently, Cockney Englishmen, soldiers of fortune who appear to be inept but are, in fact, skilled in special operations.

This is a fanciful account of Churchill’s escape. The story illustrates his coming of age from a rather callow officer and aristocrat into a man of experience, tolerance and far-seeing ability. He spends the period of his escape and deliverance in the wilderness and grows in stature as a result. Like others who benefit from solitude or near solitude, Churchill is given some insight into the future, and the parts that he will play as a statesman on the world stage. The story is really a journey through his early life, but one that he remembers all his days with nostalgia. He learns that this time on the veldt will be his last freedom before his eventual duty to the free

world as a great man. During his journey he learns to face his 'Black Dog' a severe depression that revisits him throughout his life, especially while in high office.

After an accident in Swaziland on the way to the coast, he receives a detailed prediction from an African oracle. It predicts his political frustrations, his years out of office, his responsibility for peoples' lives and his steadfastness in the face of a totalitarian Machiavelli.

In the later chapters of the novel, Churchill meets and falls in love with the leader of the Medallion Society, Lady Kathleen Long-Carey, the wife of the British Consul in Laurengo Marques. She is a very strong, independent woman with four children. The affair is brief but passionate and Churchill learns a year later that she has given birth to a fifth child, Spencer.

Churchill eventually escapes by steamer from the Port of Laurengo Marques and sails for Durban. There he meets up with his mother, Lady Jennie Churchill and his brother Jack, who are setting up an Anglo-American hospital ship. He never meets Lady Kathleen again.

The story is told in descriptive language with no untoward dialogue. Descriptions of the African country and the occasional use of Afrikaans and Siswati are only used as local background. I have not used any gratuitous sex, but have stuck to the Victorian practices of the times.

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