A Second Choice
Winston S. Churchill

If I had to live my life over again in the same surroundings, no doubt I should have the same perplexities and hesitations; no doubt I should have my same sense of proportion, my same guiding lights, my same onward thrust, my same limitations. And if these came in contact with the same external facts, why should I not run as the result along exactly the same grooves? Of course if the externals are varied, if accident and chance flow out through new uncharted channels, I shall vary accordingly. But then I should not be living my life over again, I should be having another life in a world whose structure and history would to a large extent diverge from this one.

If, for instance, when I went to Monte Carlo and staked my money on red, as I usually do, having a preference for the optimistic side of things, and the whirling ivory ball had fallen into a red slot in the roulette wheel instead of falling, as it nearly always did on these occasions, into a black slot, I might have made a lot of money. If I had invested this money twenty years ago in plots of land on the lake shore at Chicago and had never gone to Monte Carlo any more, I might be a multi-millionaire. On the other hand, if fired by my good luck I had continued to gamble, I might have become an habitué of the tables, and should now be one of those melancholy shadows we see creeping in the evening around the gaming and so-called pleasure resorts of Europe. Clearly two processes are at work, the first dictating where the ivory ball is to come to rest and the second what reaction it is to produce in me. If both these are to vary, their interplay becomes too intricate for us even to catch one glimpse of what might have been! Therefore let us suppose that the march of events and its freaks and accidents remain as we now know them and that all that happens is that I have another choice.

But now I must ask an important question: Do I have my new choice with my present knowledge of what has actually happened? Or am I to have nothing better in health, character, knowledge and faith to guide me next time than I had before? If the latter, our argument comes very quickly to a dead end. If the same choice and the same environment were at any given moment to be repeated, and I were the same person, I should infallibly take the same step. If, for instance, I were the sort of person who would spin a coin to settle whether he should take a journey, or buy a house, or open a lawsuit, or join a government, and the coin in fact came down tails up as it had before, I should certainly act as I did then.

If, then, there is to be any reality in the new choice offered to me to live my life over again, I must have foreknowledge. I must carry back with me to this new starting-point the whole picture and story of the world and of my own part in it, as I now know them. Then surely I shall know what to make for and what to avoid; then surely I shall be able to choose my path with certainty. I shall have success in all my dealings. Thus
A Second Choice

armed I shall be able to guide others and, indeed, guide the human race away from the follies in which they wallow, away from the errors to which they are slaves, away from the endless tribulations in which they plunge themselves.

But wait a minute. All that I was offered was one choice, to live my life over again. I take back with me to that moment all that I know today. But once I have exercised my choice my present picture of existing world’s history and all my own life story is out of date, or rather it will never happen. Of course if I use my foreknowledge only in some trifling matter, that will not make much appreciable difference in the currents of cause and effect. But it will nevertheless make immediately a different world around me.

I might, for instance, without altering the economy of the universe, use my foreknowledge to back the winner of the Derby at the first moment that I began to live my life over again. But my foreknowledge would give me no assurance about the next Derby. True that in the life of the world as it has worked out, I know the name of the horse which won. But now something new has happened. I have won such an enormous stake that several important bookmakers have defaulted. One of their richest clients was ruined in the crash. In despair he jumped into a pond. The client happened to be the owner of the horse that was going to win the Derby next year. His untimely death of course disqualified his horse. Under our silly rules it was struck out of the race, and I, proceeding to Epsom next year with all my foreknowledge, found myself the most ignorant man on the Downs about what was going to happen. I was so cluttered up with all my recollections of the way the other horses had run in the world as it would have been, that I made the most foolish speculations about what would now happen in the new world which my supernatural intuition had made. Thus we may say that if one had the chance to live one’s life over again foreknowledge would, in important decisions, be only fully effective once. Thereafter I should be dealing with a continually diverging skein of consequence which would increasingly affect my immediate environment.

If these thoughts are true about small personal matters, consider how much more potent and how final would be a new choice with foreknowledge upon some great or decisive issue. When my armoured train was thrown off the rails by the Boers in the South African War and I had to try to clear the line under fire, I was obliged to keep getting in and out of the cab of the engine which was our sole motive power. I therefore took off my Mauser pistol, which got in my way. But for this I should forty minutes later have fired two or three shots at twenty yards at a mounted burgher named Botha, who summoned me to surrender. If I had killed him on that day, November 15, 1899, the history of South Africa would certainly have been different and almost certainly would have been less fortunate. This was the Botha who afterward became Commander-in-Chief of the Boers and later Prime Minister of the South African Union. But for his authority and vigour the South African rebellion which broke out at the beginning of the Great War might never have been nipped in the bud. In this case the Australian and New Zealand army corps then sailing in convoy across the Indian Ocean would have been
A Second Choice

deflected from Cairo to the Cape. All preparations to divert the convoy at Colombo had actually been made. Instead of guarding the Suez Canal it would have fought with the Boer insurgents. By such events both the Australian and South African points of view would have been profoundly altered. Moreover, unless the Anzacs had been available in Egypt by the end of 1914 there would have been no nucleus of an army to attack the Gallipoli Peninsula in the spring, and all that tremendous story would have worked out quite differently. Perhaps it would have been better, perhaps it would have been worse. Imagination bifurcates and loses itself along the ever-multiplying paths of the labyrinth.

But at the moment when I was climbing in and out of the cab of that railway engine in Natal it was a thoughtless and unwise act on my part to lay aside the pistol upon which my chances of escape from a situation in which I was deeply compromised might in fact in a very short time depend. No use to say, ‘But if you had known with your foreknowledge that he was not going to shoot you, and that the Boers would treat you kindly and that Botha would become a great man who would unite South Africa more strongly with the British crown, you need not have fired at him.’ That is not conclusive. Many other things would have been happening simultaneously. If I had kept my pistol I should have been slower getting in and out of the engine, and I might have been hit by some bullet which as it was missed me by an inch or two, and Botha, galloping forward in hot pursuit of the fugitives from the wreck of the train, might have met — not me with my foreknowledge — but some private soldier with a rifle, who would have shot him dead, while I myself, sent with the wounded into the unhealthy Intombi Spruit hospital at Ladysmith, should probably have died of enteric fever.

If we look back on our past life we shall see that one of its most usual experiences is that we have been helped by our mistakes and injured by our most sagacious decisions. I suppose if I had to relive my life I ought to eschew the habit of smoking. Look at all the money I have wasted on tobacco. Think of it all invested and mounting up at compound interest year after year. I remember my father in his most sparkling mood, his eye gleaming through the haze of his cigarette, saying, ‘Why begin? If you want to have an eye that is true, and a hand that does not quiver, if you want never to ask yourself a question as you ride at a fence, don’t smoke.’

But consider! How can I tell that the soothing influence of tobacco upon my nervous system may not have enabled me to comport myself with calm and with courtesy in some awkward personal encounter or negotiation, or carried me serenely through some critical hours of anxious waiting? How can I tell that my temper would have been as sweet or my companionship as agreeable if I had abjured from my youth the goddess Nicotine? Now that I think of it, if I had not turned back to get that matchbox which I left behind in my dug-out in Flanders, might I not just have walked into the shell which pitched so harmlessly a hundred yards ahead?

So far as my own personal course has been concerned, I have mostly acted in politics as I felt I wanted to act. When I have desired to do or say anything and have
refrained therefrom through prudence, slothfulness or being dissuaded by others, I have always felt ashamed of myself at the time; though sometimes afterwards I saw that it was lucky for me I was checked. I do not see how it would have been possible for me in the mood I was in after the South African War to have worked enthusiastically with the Conservative party in the mood they were in at that time. Even apart from the Free Trade quarrel, I was in full reaction against the war and they in full exploitation in the political sphere of the so-called victory. Thus when the Protection issue was raised I was already disposed to view all their actions in the most critical light. The flood tides of a new generation long pent up flowed forward with the breaking of the dikes upon the low-lying country. Of course it is a lamentable thing to leave the party which you have been brought up in from a child, and where nearly all your friends and kinsmen are. Still, I am sure that in those days I acted in accordance with my deepest feeling and with all that recklessness in so doing which belongs to youth and is indeed the glory of youth and its most formidable quality.

When the Great War broke out and I started with the enormous prestige of having prepared the fleet in spite of so much opposition and of having it ready according to the science of those days, almost to a single ship, at the fateful hour, I made the singular mistake of being as much interested in the military as in the naval operations. Thus, without prejudice to my Admiralty work, I was led into taking minor military responsibilities upon my shoulders which exposed me to all those deadly risks on a small scale that await those in high stations who come too closely in contact with action in detail.

I ought, for instance, never to have gone to Antwerp. I ought to have remained in London and endeavoured to force the Cabinet and Lord Kitchener to take more effective action than they did, while I all the time sat in my position of great authority with all the precautions which shield great authority from rough mischance. Instead, I passed four or five vivid days amid the shells, excitement and tragedy of the defence of Antwerp. I soon became so deeply involved in the local event that I had in common decency to offer to the government my resignation of my office as First Lord of the Admiralty in order to see things through on the spot. Lucky indeed it was for me that my offer was not accepted, for I should only have been involved in the command of a situation which locally at any rate had already been rendered hopeless by the general course of the War. In all great business very large errors are excused or even unperceived, but in definite and local matters small mistakes are punished out of all proportion. I might well have lost all the esteem I gained by the mobilization and readiness of the fleet, through getting mixed up in the firing-lines at Antwerp. Those who are charged with the direction of supreme affairs must sit on the mountain-tops of control; they must never descend into the valleys of direct physical and personal action.

It seems clear now that when Lord Kitchener went back upon his undertaking to send the 29th Division to reinforce the army gathering in Egypt for the Dardanelles
expedition and delayed it for nearly three weeks, I should have been prudent then to have broken off the naval attack. It would have been quite easy to do so, and all arrangements were made upon that basis, I did not do it, and from that moment I became accountable for an operation the vital control of which had passed to other hands. The fortunes of the great enterprise which I had set on foot were henceforward to be decided by other people. But I was to bear the whole burden in the event of miscarriage. Undoubtedly I might have obtained a far larger measure of influence upon the general course of the War if I had detached myself in the Admiralty from all special responsibility and made the ships sail away once the troops were fatally delayed. However, it must not be forgotten that the land attack upon the Gallipoli Peninsula, costly and unsuccessful as it was, played a great part in bringing Italy into the War in the nick of time, kept Bulgaria in awed suspense through the summer of 1915, and before it was finished broke the heart of the Turkish army.

Sometimes our mistakes and errors turn to great good fortune. When the Conservatives suddenly plunged into Protection in 1923, a dozen Liberal constituencies pressed me to be their candidate. And clearly Manchester was for every reason the battleground on which I should have fought. A seat was offered me there, which, as it happened, I should in all probability have won. Instead, through some obscure complex I chose to go off and fight against a Socialist in Leicester, where, being also attacked by the Conservatives, I was of course defeated. On learning of these two results in such sharp contrast, I could have kicked myself. Yet as it turned out, it was the very fact that I was out of Parliament, free from all attachment and entanglement in any particular constituency, that enabled me to make an independent and unbiased judgment of the situation when the Liberals most unwisely and wrongly put the Socialist minority government for the first time into power, thus sealing their own doom.

Thus I found myself free a few months later to champion the anti-Socialist cause in the Westminster by-election, and so regained for a time at least the good will of all those strong Conservative elements, some of whose deepest feelings I share and can at critical moments express, although they have never liked or trusted me. But for my erroneous judgment in the General Election of 1923 I should never have regained contact with the great party into which I was born and from which I had been severed by so many years of bitter quarrel.

When I survey in the light of these reflections the scene of my past life as a whole, I have no doubt that I do not wish to live it over again. Happy, vivid and full of interest as it has been, I do not seek to tread again the toilsome and dangerous path. Not even an opportunity of making a different set of mistakes and experiencing a different series of adventures and successes would lure me. How can I tell that the good fortune which has up to the present attended me with fair constancy would not be lacking at some critical moment in another chain of causation?
Let us be contented with what has happened to us and thankful for all we have been spared. Let us accept the natural order in which we move. Let us reconcile ourselves to the mysterious rhythm of our destinies, such as they must be in this world of space and time. Let us treasure our joys but not bewail our sorrows. The glory of light cannot exist without its shadows. Life is a whole, and good and ill must be accepted together. The journey has been enjoyable and well worth making — once.