

By FIELD MARSHAL MONTGOMERY

I FIRST MET Sir Winston Churchill in June, 1940, after returning from Dunkirk in command of the Third Division. In those days I knew few politicians and was suspicious of most of that profession; I reckoned they were largely responsible for the troubles which had descended upon us. But he impressed me at once as a man of decision and action, knowing what should be done and having the courage and determination to do it.

Churchill has both kinds of courage, physical and moral. Sometimes his courage was aggressive and sometimes modest. But over-all it was a clearly defined quality which shone forth in wartime, and in peacetime in the House of Commons—and also during periods of illness, when he fought so bravely.

It was as a national leader in critical times that he rose to the greatest heights. When Britain's very existence as a nation was threatened in 1940, he knew well that the British spirit was there but needed to be called forth. So he spoke to us through the BBC and brought the crisis home to the nation in words which rang and thundered like the Psalms. All will recall the eagerness with which we looked forward to his broadcasts and speeches in the early days of Hitler's war. I doubt if any man in history has ever made such grim utterances and yet given so many people such a feeling of strength and exuberance—even cheerfulness and lightheartedness—and a sense of having got one's teeth into something. He was British to the core, with a sturdy refusal to be carried away by the storms and stresses of the moment. He was a rocklike figure in an emergency, on whom all could lean.

Never has any land found any leader who so matched the hour as did Winston Churchill in 1940. He towered head and shoulders above the leaders of all other nations. He inspired us all. There was a certain magnificence about him which transformed the lead of other men into gold.

And then the war ended, and he was discarded by the British people. I well remember the first visit I paid him after the general election of 1945; he was like a man who had been poleaxed; he couldn't understand it. But I reckoned it was for the best. He who had carried Britain through the weary years of war was completely worn out and needed a rest—although he would never have admitted it. Anyhow, he had the rest he needed and returned six years later to lead the nation again—this time in peace.

Our Friendship Deepened

It wasn't until the war ended that I began to know him really well and our true friendship began; we have now been close friends for 16 years, since mid-1945, and I reckon I know him better than most others—I mean "as a man," not only as a wartime prime minister.

He is a very good friend, at least I have always found him so. He has his enemies and detractors, of course, and I know some of them; but all they can say will never dim my affection for him. He is a wonderful storyteller. It is a real delight to get him talking about the past and to listen to stories of his Sandhurst days, or about the battle of Omdurman, or how he was captured by the Boers and of his subsequent escape.

I have often sat with him until the small hours of the morning listening to his accounts of bygone days, forgetting that my normal bedtime is early—and glad to forget. He can be very interesting about the personalities, political and military, of his own lifetime. But all in all, he is a very fair critic, and a man had to be pretty bad before he would comment adversely.

Lately it has not been so easy to get him to talk, and if you ask him to tell you about some contemporary of his earlier days he will perhaps say a few words and then shrug and stop—but you can generally guess his opinion from the nature of the shrug!

Churchill has his faults, like all humans. He is impatient; he can be very intolerant; he can be suspicious; and—dare I say it?—a touch of jealousy has appeared at times. But when you weigh up the virtues and the faults, what a tremendous balance of virtue is found.

He is intensely loyal. He reveled in responsibility. He could listen, but with considerable impatience if he did not agree with what you were saying! And he could decide, but as Hitler's war drew to a conclusion he seemed to find it increasingly difficult to give quick decisions.

He has a great sense of humor. Of late years this has become of the quiet type. For instance, when I stay at Chartwell he will offer me wine at dinner—as the gesture of a host, but also as a joke. He knows well what the reply will be, and when it comes he will look at me with a shy smile and say: "You don't mind if I do!"

I visit him frequently, and I reckon the more his friends rally round him and keep him interested the better—because he is now old and tired and must not be allowed to feel we have no further use for him. We discuss the past a great deal; he delights in talking about his visits to my headquarters during the war. And occasionally I try and get him on to the future, but that is not so easy; he seems to think that the future is for others to handle—and so it is.

Sir Winston Was a Slow Starter

An interesting point occurs to me about Winston Churchill. In his school life at Harrow and at Sandhurst, he cut no ice at all; he didn't like either place. This shows perhaps that it is a mistake to develop your powers too early, since they may fizzle out. He developed his powers in no uncertain manner in due course! But it is interesting to reflect that if it had not been for Hitler's war, he would very possibly have gone down in history as a political failure! His reputation would, of course, have been firmly established as an author and painter.

How was it then that when the call came in 1940, Winston Churchill was able to play his part as a national leader?

Of course, he had tremendous experience with the governmental machine. He had held many ministerial appointments, and he understood the fighting services better than any other minister of his time. He had been a successful war correspondent and knew what went on at the headquarters of a C.-in-C. (commander-in-chief) in the field—or perhaps I should say, what formerly went on! He had traveled widely and had a good knowledge of the British Dominions and Colonies. He knew the people of Britain better than most, and he knew how to speak to them.

All these things are well known, but there must have been something else. I have often talked with him on this subject in order to extract from him the information I wanted—what was that "something" which completed his equipment and ensured he was ready when the call came? Here is the answer to the conundrum:

Winston believes with Machiavelli that whereas fortune or fate will decide one half of our life, the other half will depend on ourselves. If we prepare ourselves for what might come, master our professions, and study how the great men of the past overcame their problems—then all will be well.

So he read widely and in particular studied the lives of great men. When studying their problems, he didn't bother overmuch about details; what he wanted to know was the conditions of the problem facing the man and what were the reasons which influenced the statesman or military commander to reach the decision he made.

This study taught him, when faced himself with some difficult problem, to consider the actual facts of the situation as they appeared to him at that time; he refused to allow himself to be influenced by a decision given on a similar problem at some other time, because the conditions of that other problem were different from those surrounding the problem he now faced.

Then he is a master at finding out what others think. He would make some quite outrageous statement to the Chiefs of Staff, just to arouse their heated opposition and get their real views. I suppose this might be termed "teasing," but it gave him the information he wanted.

Lady Churchill—Beautiful and Talented

It would be wrong to talk about Winston Churchill as known personally to me without mentioning also Lady Churchill—who to me, and to her many friends, is always "Clemmie." She is a beautiful and talented lady, and I am one of her most devoted admirers. She is very well read and has great wisdom, and it is a real delight to talk with her. And she has courage, which quality has been needed at times.

I recall particularly the dinner party at No. 10 on the night of April 4, 1955, when the Queen and Prince Philip dined with Sir Winston and Lady Churchill. Clemmie was in great pain from neuritis, but only a few of us knew; she stuck it out and was a most gracious hostess the whole evening. It was one of the bravest acts I have seen. She had to be brave for another reason; it was her last party at No. 10, since Winston was to resign as prime minister the next day.

I will never forget that evening. I was living in France because of my NATO appointment at SHAPE, and I came over to London for the dinner.

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