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Field Marshal Montgomery leans over to chat with Sir Winston and Lady Churchill while attending a reunion of Eighth Army veterans in London.

My Friend Churchill

(Continued)

It was, of course, a tremendous privilege to be asked, since the dinner party could not be large. I don't know how many of those present knew that Winston was to resign at 4:30 p.m. the next day, but I did. I had arrived early to have a talk with him, and he told me.

At the end of dinner, Winston made a speech, quite short, but wonderful in his references to the Queen; he was clearly greatly moved by the occasion, both of them knowing what was to happen the next day. He finished and stood there glass in hand; there was absolute silence in the room for some seconds, perhaps ten, and we all wondered what was coming next. Suddenly he raised his glass aloft, and with a shout of triumph his voice rang out—"The Queen." We all sprang to our feet and drank the loyal toast. It was most dramatic, and only Winston could have made the scene.

Then the Queen spoke, very simply and quite short, her object being to ask us all to drink to the health of "my Prime Minister." We all wondered whether a Queen of England had ever proposed such a toast before, and I still don't know the answer.

I have hanging in my home two paintings by Winston. This is somewhat of a triumph since he, who is so very generous, is not inclined to give away his paintings—and I don't blame him! He loves them, and he delights to sit in his studio and talk about the memories each picture recalls; he has a great many, and the pleasant hours I have spent with him in the studio will always remain in my memory.

There was no difficulty about getting the first one; I was moving into my home at Isington Mill late in 1948 and, since all my belongings were destroyed by German bombing during Hitler's war, I asked him for a picture for my study. He gave me a painting of a scene near Marrakesh, in Morocco, not far from where we had a picnic when I spent New Year's Day, 1943, with him on my way back to England from Italy.

"Battle" for a Painting

The second was more difficult. When I had got things sorted out in my study, I needed another picture and, when I reckoned the moment was right, I asked for one. I was wrong. The moment was not right; there was no downright refusal—he merely ignored my question and changed the subject! I then adopted the tactics of the indirect approach, a very useful tactic in battle—but which I had not tried before at Chartwell.

I enlisted the help of Mary Soames, and we extracted from the studio a delightful painting of the pond at Blenheim; this I took to his room and praised it, which pleased him greatly. I added that Mary reckoned it was exactly right for my study; only one thing was needed—he hadn't signed it. He saw the battle was lost, sent for some painting materials, and signed. When I took it to be framed in London, the dealer pointed out that it had been signed twice; the first signature was in red on a dark background, and neither Winston nor I had noticed it. I have never before seen a painting which has been signed twice by the artist. Perhaps it is unique; I hope so!

Both paintings are of water scenes, at which I consider he excels. His painting I like best is "The River Loup," which hangs in the Tate Gallery. The incidents of the pictures he gave me show his kindness of heart.

He doesn't paint so much now as he did formerly; he is old, and quickly gets tired. But we can all be glad that he is still most happily with us, enjoying in dignity and quietude the evening of his splendid life.