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WHO'S WHO—AND WHY: W. CHURCHILL

by Samuel G. Blythe



WHEN IT COMES to a neat, factful, comprehensive description of a leading personage of England who once escaped from prison, I acknowledge the exceeding talent of the unknown Boer who wrote a paragraph about Winston Churchill, the biggest young man in England, now First Lord of the Admiralty, but at that time a war correspondent in South Africa.

Boers run largely to whiskers and assay but a trace of imagination to the pound. This particular Boer saw concretely. He said: "Englishman; twenty-five years old; indifferent build; walks a little bent forward; pale appearance; red-brownish hair; small mustache, barely perceptible; talks through his nose; cannot pronounce the letter S properly and does not know one word of Dutch."

I have watched Winston Churchill in action and in repose, and so have many others; but none of us is able to improve on that paragraph, albeit the red-brownish hair is thinner now than it was then, the mustache is gone, and the years have thickened the frame a bit. He still walks a little bent forward, still has the pallor and still fails when he tackles the letter S. He couldn't say "She sells seashells by the seashore" if he were promised ten new dreadnoughts from Parliament as a reward.

Not that that makes any difference. Very few people want to say "She sells seashells"; and the mere fact that the letter S, occurring now and again in the language, causes Churchill to fizz linguistically like a bottle of soda pop, doesn't detract from his ability as an orator, but rather adds to the piquancy of his speech. Moreover, when it comes to writing the letter S, and all other letters in combinations of words, there are very few persons indulging in that pastime at present who can convey their thought so clearly, so picturesquely, so effectively, as this same young man.

He is only thirty-eight now, and he is a member of the English Ministry, the biggest figure in English politics—bar Lloyd George—and bigger in many ways than that Welshman; and he has been the wonder of the empire since he was twenty-five. The only American to whom he can be compared is Roosevelt; and that comparison isn't especially apt, for Churchill writes far better than Roosevelt does, talks far better, and at thirty-eight has gone farther than Roosevelt had when he reached that age. Of course Churchill never can be king, and Roosevelt has been president; but Churchill will undoubtedly be a Prime Minister of England one of these days—and to be Prime Minister of England is no small shakes of a job!

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They have points in common—both are impetuous, virile, enthusiastic, belligerent demagogues in the good sense of the word. Both take their careers as adventures. Both are crusaders. Both have had no hesitancy in shifting political obligations when the time seemed opportune. Both are, indeed, opportunists. Both are men of wide information and great and interesting experience. Both have been soldiers and both are born politicians. Both are tremendous workers.

Both are men of gentle birth, and both are held high in popular esteem, though each is basically of aristocratic tendencies and sympathies.

When Churchill was a youngster he was, speaking Americanwise, a fresh youngster. They used to make him run round the cricket grounds at school a set number of times for talking too much. When he was a subaltern with his regiment he suggested that Lord Kitchener—even then the great general—should be brought over and introduced to him, instead of going over to be introduced to Kitchener. When he came into public life his supporters called this quality charming impudence, and his enemies referred to it as insufferable insolence. Whatever it was, in his early days he had the grand manner. He was quite impressed with his own superiority. He considered himself a natural dominator. He never asked a man to do a thing, but told him to do it—not as if he wanted a favor, but as if he expected it as a right. In his early days in politics he took none of the stodgy political pretensions of the older statesmen seriously, but flouted them, laughed at them, was insolent, impudent, satirical, sarcastic, by turns. He would break a lance with any of them, and had no reverence for age, reputation or awe of convention and precedent. The son of Lord Randolph Churchill, himself an English statesman of much renown, he had a great name back of him, and he saw nothing but a future of adventure before him.

So he weighed in, essaying anything that came to hand and considering himself a knight in search of any hazard that might ensue. His quality of mind was, and is still, that boyish quality that sees a deed of high emprise in anything in which he may be engaged. He thinks in terms of the apotheosis. Let him take up a subject, and that subject immediately becomes the most important subject in the world. The fate of the nation is always impending with Churchill; the ship of state is always going on the rocks; the edge of the precipice is forever close at hand. His sunsets are always more beautiful, his sunrises more glorious, his dangers more vivid, his pleasures more pronounced, than those of any other. As he looks at it, the sunset is his personal perquisite, and the sun always rises for his especial benefit.

When he starts to set forth a proposition he sets it forth in the ultimate manner. Do this—else you perish! He detects the crack of doom when the noise may be only a peaceful Englishman opening an egg. Intrinsically a soldier, he thinks largely in terms of soldiering—Up, guards, and at them! His natural tendency is to boil over like a geyser. He is as ebullient as Old Faithful. In his early days, his friends say, his impudence amounted to rudeness. He defied the whole universe and considered himself eminently capable of making it over to suit his large ideas.

It might be thought that, with attributes of this kind, Churchill would be an impressionist instead of a plodder; but though he is a man who takes impressions instantly, who flashes over a situation and comprehends it, he is in reality a most astonishing digger. He writes and rewrites his important speeches, polishing them for days before he delivers them. He rehearses them time after time, and his industry is monumental. He

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Young Winston

always has his subjects well in hand. When he speaks he allows himself no asides, such as those that come up to perplex Lloyd George. He has a good breadth of view, and the facility for preaching economy, for example, and at the same time proposing an unprecedented naval expenditure, weeping the while over the pathetic necessity for the outlay.

Like every great orator and every great politician, Churchill is an actor. His natural tendency is to exaggeration—that is, his mind, because of that boyish quality I have mentioned, tends to make every impression a great impression, and tends also to lead him to tricks of manner that are impressive, though artificial. When he sits down with an air of weariness he seems to be the weariest man in the world. When he puts his hand on his brow he presents a picture of a man thinking greater thoughts than any other ever has. When he declaims a peroration it is with the conviction that this is the final pronouncement on the subject, the acme of all the wisdom of all the universe—for he convinces himself that this is so.

Politics began as an adventure with him, and now it is a passion. He has changed in manner, not because he has really changed in nature but because he has thought it expedient to curb that gay spirit of turbulent dissent and assent, and apparently to be discreet. He wears solemn blacks, gives the air of heavy responsibility, checks his impulsiveness, talks infrequently. This isn't natural. It is artificial and done after thought, clearly mapped out and definitely decided upon as the proper course. Within, Churchill is the same flamboyant, crusading, eager, headlong person he always was—but he is a politician also, and that accounts for his present attitude.

He went into the army when he was twenty-one, and saw service in India, in Africa and elsewhere. He was a war correspondent, has been a lecturer, has written several books, all of them excellent, and one—his biography of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill—a work that has been held to be one of the best of English life stories.

What this young man will do in the next twenty years is one of the fascinating problems of English politics. No one can predict, for Churchill isn't subject to predictions. The most favored opinion is that eventually he will be the leader of a party composed of Sir Edward Grey and the younger Tory Democrats against Lloyd George, leading the Radicals and Socialists. Churchill has worked the greater-navy game with good effect; and he goes on the theory that the English people want to be governed, not legislated for, and that the English hate all foreigners, especially the Germans—which is quite true. But he should have a kindly feeling for Americans, for, you see, his mother is an American and that likewise may account for many things—his quickness of mind, for example!

