**Elizabeth II and Winston Churchill: the story of the friendship between the British statesman and the sovereign**

They are two of the most important figures of the 20th century. And they were great friends.

The story of this friendship has a beginning. Namely, the day Churchill receives an unexpected message in his home in Kent, Chartwell: that of King George VI who calls him to duty asking him to form a government in wartime.

It is 1951 and the statesman is itching to return to work; his had been a forced political retirement, after having held the office of Prime Minister from 1940 to 1945 and several other ministerial positions from the First World War onwards. “I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and this trial,” he wrote in a letter thinking back to the moment of the “call” by George VI. And it is also among his papers that we find the first documented reference to the future queen; to be precise, in a letter to his wife Clementine written from Balmoral Castle, on 25 September 1928: “There is no one here at all except some of the family and Princess Elizabeth, aged 2. She is quite a character. She has an air of authority and thoughtfulness that is surprising in a child…”.

He had seen her grow up, the princess, since her father Prince Albert had ascended to the throne after his brother’s abdication for the love of a woman (he is Edward VIII, she is Wallis Simpson), but they had certainly not been a regular acquaintance because the child did not participate in the political life of the kingdom. He did not really know her until she became sovereign. Too soon. Elizabeth was only 25 when the news reached her: the king was dead, long live the queen.

When Elizabeth stepped off the plane returning from Kenya, where she was traveling when the news of her father's death reached her, Churchill was there, at the foot of the steps, to welcome her and pay homage to her as queen.

As for her, Elizabeth had grown up considering Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime prime minister, the greatest politician of all time; "She venerated him as so many other young men of the time did," wrote her biographer. As for him, he was sincerely shocked by the news of the king's premature death (George VI died of coronary thrombosis at the age of 56), and frightened at the idea of ​​finding himself in front of a very young and inexperienced queen. "I barely know her, and she's only a child," he told his private secretary, John Colville, who however knew Elizabeth personally, and then tried to console him by saying that he would have found her fascinating, attractive, intelligent and immensely conscientious.

Indeed, she won him over from the start: “He fell under her spell. I think he (my father) sensed her immense sense of duty from the very beginning, and looked forward to his appointment with the young monarch on Tuesday afternoons,” reads a letter from Churchill’s youngest daughter, Mary, to her daughter Emma Soames.

The queen reciprocated his pleasure in his company; Jock Colville writes that she “enjoyed audiences with Churchill more than with any of his successors,” a fact confirmed by the queen’s private secretary, Sir Tommy Lascelles, who recalls how much they laughed during their interviews: “I could not hear what they were talking about, but most of the time the interviews were punctuated with laughter, and Winston generally left wiping his eyes.” During her reign, Elizabeth II saw 15 prime ministers pass through her, and with none of them did their weekly meetings last more than the agreed 30 minutes, while with Churchill the door remained closed for up to two hours.

Before the harmony, there was a sincere mutual admiration between them. The statesman's affection for Elizabeth's parents, together with the decisive experience of the Second World War, had given them a store of memories and a common perspective, despite the age difference of five decades. As Queen, she relied on him for guidance and Churchill was always aware of the importance of his role as constitutional guardian: "I have always tried to keep Your Majesty in the face of the grave and complex problems of our time," he wrote to her. "Very early on, after taking office as Prime Minister, I became aware of the understanding with which Your Majesty undertook the august duties of a modern Sovereign and of the wealth of knowledge she had already accumulated through a wise and lively education. This enabled Your Majesty to understand, instinctively, the relationships and balances of the British Constitution so deeply dear to the mass of the Nation and to the strongest and most stable forces within it. I became aware of the real will to serve as well as to govern, and indeed to govern by serving.”

“To the Prime Minister, both my husband and I owe so much, for the wise guidance he offered during the early years of my reign. I will always be deeply grateful to him", Her Majesty announced when her friend decided to retire in 1955. Privately, however, it seems that she wrote him - by hand - a heartbreaking letter, to tell him that she would miss him very much.

For him, her old friend, the Queen even broke protocol. It happened years later, when Churchill died in 1965: after having granted him a state funeral (an honor that is only granted to sovereigns, granted to Sir Churchill only to Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, and William Gladstone) Elizabeth decided to arrive at St Paul's Cathedral before the statesman's family, contrary to what was prescribed, and sat in the church to await their arrival. The Queen does not wait for anyone, which is why she should be the last person to arrive at any function, but with that gesture Elizabeth managed to demonstrate her respect for the dearest affections of her friend Winston.