

The Conscience of the Rich

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The 'Strangers and Brothers' are about ambition and power. In this third part the main protagonist Lewis Eliot is reduced to an observer, albeit a rather active one.

During his examination for the bar our protagonist notices an acquaintance among his fellow examinees by name of Charles March. He had met him a few times during his studies at the Inn and had felt an instinctive kinship with him and regretted that he had not developed it further. We all meet in life potential friends whom we for one reason or another, acquaintances we never let develop into friendships. Eliot decides not to pass it up this time and after the examination is finished he makes his approach. As it will turn out they will indeed become intimate friends just as intuited. While Eliot had a humble background and has had to struggle all along to get ahead, March stemmed from a very rich family, and as with all rich people he felt entitled to success and to be given his due. As a result he just scraped by on the examination, not exerting himself beyond the minimum as it really did not matter that much, while Eliot is placed among those making up the top of the list of contestants and consequently earns, unlike his friend, a scholarship, without which he would not have been able to continue. For him the Bar and the legal profession is a matter of life and death, while for March just one option among others, something the latter cannot help himself to point out not without the touch of condescension kindness often involves. What is not apparent from the beginning, but will only eventually emerge, is that the family March is Jewish. Charles March himself very much resents his Jewish identity because he feels that it traps and stereotypes him and he wants to be judged on his own merits, not just as a Jew. In Society there resides a quiet anti-Semitism, which is hard to put your finger on. It certainly does not prevent the Jews from worldly success, be it financial or political, yet it puts them apart as strange birds, very much tolerated of course, but never fully accepted and included 'as ones of us'. It works of course both ways. The Jews are felt somewhat apart, which makes them more conscious of their own special identity, which in its turn irritates the outsiders, the Gentiles, who consequently feel that they are even further apart, which in its turn strengthens Jewish identity and sense of specialness, which further alienates people at large, and so on and on. Not that anything necessarily goes out of hand, only that divisions are felt as being more and more significant and divisive. Charles wants nothing of this but there is not much he can do about it.

Eventually Lewis is introduced to Charles father Leonard March, referred to by his children as Mr L., as well as to his doting sister Katherine at the time still a teenager. The March family is not only fabulously rich but also very close-knit with regular weekly family dinners involving large numbers of participants with concomitant rampant internal gossip. Into this charmed circle Eliot is introduced and welcomed. While Lewis did much better on the examination than Charles, his career takes a very slow start, while that of Charles is jump-started because of his wealthy Jewish connections and an important case comes to

him almost right away, giving him an opportunity to show his mettle. Eliot on the other hand has been fobbed off to a certain Herbert Getliffe, a rather cantankerous character, on the surface confused and fumbling, deep inside rather sharp, not to say sharkish. He is warned about him, but feels he has not much choice in the matter but has to accept what he has been assigned to. And Getliffe for all his friendliness and talk about looking out for the smart and promising, of whom Eliot is obviously an example, is for some reason reluctant to let any case come his way.

March may have done worse on the exam, for the simple reason that he did not particularly study for it, but as a legal professional he seems much more adept than Eliot, having a natural affinity for it, as well as the required street smartness (and if there is one profession in which street smartness counts it is in the law). He does very well on his first case, and a brilliant career seems open to him, much to the pride and satisfaction of his father, yet he nevertheless decides to drop out to the surprise of the many and to the bitter consternation of his father. Why did he do it? He seems to have such natural talent and in the future he cannot from time to time refrain from giving Eliot smart advice.

The novel is about ambition and power. His father early on in life relinquished his ambition. The family bank had done very well under the guidance of his father, but he realized that he could not compete with him, the best he and his brothers could do, was to keep the bank going, giving up hope of it growing. Also times had changed by the end of the 19th century, and maybe even the father would have been at a loss. Before a comparatively small family bank could have a profitable niche, but now the amount of money required for loans were of a different magnitude, and their bank was inexorably phased out of their traditional markets. The brothers sold the bank while still in their thirties and from then on could live very comfortably. Leonard March abolished worldly ambitions but not his private ones, amounting to living a happy, comfortable and contented life in complete compliance with his nature and temperament; while his older brother Philip, eventually Sir Philip, embarked on a political career, rising almost to the very top of Government, short of a ministerial post, a Whitehall career which puzzled his younger brother, filling him with a mixture of disgust and respect, with a lot of envy thrown in. And Leonard also wanted power, not worldly, but private familial one, which in his case boiled down to dominating the lives of his two children. His predicament, which is somewhat universal is described by the author as follows.

Even Mr. March, the most realistic of men, could not always forgive himself for his own nature. He could not quite forget the illusion, which we all have, most strongly when we are young, that every kind of action is possible to us if only we use our will. He felt as we all do, when we have slowly come to terms with our temperament and no longer try to be different from ourselves; we may be happier now, but we cannot help looking back to the days when we struggled against the sight of our limitations, when, miserable and conflict-ridden perhaps, we still in flashes of hope held the whole world in our hands. For the loss, as we come to know ourselves, is that now we know what we can never do.

Mr. March is still envious of himself as a young man, and in spite of his contentment does not shy away from calling himself a failure from time to time. And as is often the case with men who have abdicated but never really come to terms with it, to invest all

those rejected hopes in his son. And to quote the author again

...; for everything that one aspired to, and had to dismiss as one discovered one's weaknesses, could be built up again in a son. Could be built up more extravagantly, as a matter of fact; because, even in youth, the frailties of one's own temperament were always liable to bring one back to realism, while the frailties of a son's could be laughed off.

Two more characters need to be brought to the scene. One is Francis Getliffe, a younger half-brother of the barrister Getliffe, and a friend of both Charles and Lewis from student days, and more interestingly and significantly Ann Simon, whom Eliot meets at a party, to which he has been invited through the machinations of Charles in order to meet important people and have his career advanced. He is struck by the friendliness and beauty of Ann, and relishes the disinterested concerns she shows him, such a contrast to his own relation to his troubled, not say tormented, romantic involvement with Sheila¹ Katherine catches on and she invites her down to the summer place of Mr. March, much to the dismay of her father, with the hope that she will rescue Lewis from his girl friend. But in life (and occasionally also in novels aspiring to be realistic) things do not always turn out as intended. Instead Charles falls promptly in love with her. This may not be so surprising, after all after having defected from the Bar he is in a state of comfortable, if unsatisfying, idleness and dreams about filling the void with a passion. And here she is, vulnerable, intelligent and not to forget beautiful, a fact never to be overlooked if not always acknowledged. His father is also attracted to her, and becomes in a subconscious way his son's rival for her affection and attention, but at the same time with his initial misgivings confirmed. The two can never get along.

Two crises are approaching. Katherine has fallen in love with Francis and announces that they are getting married, no matter what. Francis Getliffe is a Gentile, so the marriage is of course impossible and will destroy the father, or at least his peace of mind. Not that he disapproves of the future son-in-law personally, on the contrary, although he does not hold his academic occupation in high regard, for one thing it does not bring in much money. Eventually he comes around and the union will produce grandchildren in a steady stream, and as a result Katherine, who tried to break out from her father's dominion, now comes back into his fold, and becomes a very loyal daughter. Charles decision to marry Ann Simon also meets with resistance, but as she is Jewish and beautiful as well, it is hard to pinpoint any objective objections, and the marriage goes through. Charles feels a big relief, by marrying a Jewish woman he feels that his back is free and that he has fulfilled some obligation in the bargain. But the real crisis occurs a bit later when he announces that he will become a doctor His father is aghast, a most unsuitable profession, especially for his son, who has no experience of the natural sciences, and besides is very clumsy, like all the Marches, with his hands. It does not help that being doctor has low social prestige in the eyes of the father, and as Ann's father is a doctor, he sees her hand in the whole debacle, convinced that his son is dominated by her, willing to do anything for her; just as he himself, had he been younger and eligible, may have been willing to submit to her seductive appeal. There are struggles, fights and reconciliations, as the father tries to maintain his hold on the affections of his son, while the son desperately tries to liberate

¹ Described in detail in 'Time of Hope' the first installment of the series.

himself from the demands of his father. Of course he goes through with his decision and eventually sets up a practice, involving surgery for which his lack of manual dexterity ought to have made him singularly unsuitable.

It is hard at first to get a time frame for the narrative, and as it is a realistic one that is very important. But the year is now 1935 or so, and there has been a six year hiatus, and the father has had time to turn seventy, but still a robust, healthy man, with the energies and appetites which come with it, although hidden by his general fussiness and constant worries. Now a new crisis looms. It has to do with rampant rumors of irregular practices undertaken by Herbert Getliffe, meaning exploiting inside information, about a government contract to which he became privy through official business. Philip also made big money on the contact, unwittingly according to him, as he had invested in an arms company down on its heels, but whose days surely would be ahead as there was bound to be a demand for its products. In fact it turned out that it was bought up by the company getting the government contract. It might have been fully legitimate, but people in high positions should not also be in the position of speculation. The story was being investigated by the extreme left-wing mimeographed publication *Note* whose whole existence was devoted to bring down the government through a campaign of discrediting it. Ann Simon is on the staff and it is in her power to stop the whole thing, the publications of which would damage the family, in fact she has information sufficient to kill the paper once and for all, but she does not want to do it, neither is her husband Charles willing to force her hand: The consequences of all this is that the father, furious that he no longer has any power over his son, breaks with him, as well as disinheriting him, condemning him, as he judges it. Later on the story appears and somewhat after there is a reshuffle in the Government and Philip steps down.

Now not much happens in the novel, neither does much happen in real life. It is thus devoted to realism, including psychological observations which come across as impressive when you read them, but maybe only so much hot air produced by a writer who takes himself maybe a little bit too seriously. Furthermore it is sprinkled with worldly observations which have the ring of truth. As to becoming a doctor, Charles remarks that it is the only occupation he can find where you could be utterly undistinguished and still flatter yourself a bit. The job of a doctor is tedious, Charles admits much later on, but that goes for most jobs he admits. He claims to a taste for thinking, which is not being gratified by his chosen profession, ruefully observing that if he would be stupider he would not be worse as a doctor. But one compensation it has, and that is being able to work for a living, a pleasure only truly appreciated by those having been supported in luxury all their lives. About a certain suitor of Anne, whom she had allowed to keep his hopes up far too long, Eliot remarks that although boastful, violent and uncontrolled he had the generosity you often find in misfits. True or not? Maybe. And what about the statement that nothing is as contagious as worrying. Once again, there may be something to it, I have never thought in those terms, so I should be grateful for the push. More interesting though is the observation that no one has the stamina to continuously feel old, maybe when old your are invariably reminded of your mortality from time to time, but you cannot sustain the fear, so most of the time you actually feel young, making up plans, entertaining hopes to keep you going. One maybe remark that this is simply due to old habits, and old habits

are difficult to get rid of. Sir Philip, well over seventy, still hopes for a ministry, as if he would have been a young man starting out a career. Then there are unpalatable thoughts, most of us have, but which we try to suppress. Mr. March as well, yet being too honest to succeed. When Ann is taken seriously ill in his house, he wishes fervently, despite his solicitations for her well-being and recovery, that she will die. If she dies, he reasons, Charles certainly will stop this stupid business of the *Note*, although that turns out not to be a foregone conclusion, even if he would have had the means to do so. Not being an extreme leftist like his politically committed wife, he nevertheless respects her feelings and passions.

The novels of C.P.Snow may not be to the taste of most people, but their slow measured pace, the fastidiousness and density of the writing and its attention to details add to the illusion of realism, the hallmark of every classical novel. And besides the subject matter is rather fascinating to at least some of us, and it provides the additional illusion that we as readers are being allowed a sneak view behind the curtains, sampling informed gossip, be it only of the fictitious yet with a tacitly understood generality.

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