

## Homecomings

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This book stands out by being preoccupied by love and in the erotic sense to boot. It all starts out with Sheila, the unfortunate marriage into which our hero entered foolishly but passionately many books ago. It was a question of love, but one-sided, hardly on her part, almost entirely on his. She was attractive, but above all elusive and bound to engender jealousy, the pain of which is sweet and is easily mistaken for passion. She does, however, make his life constrained, and he tries to escape it as much as possible, and in most of the books she does not enter at all, she is in fact invisible, something kept in the attic, as in *Jane Eyre*. However, in the present book, she, or rather their marriage takes front stage. She is depicted as ravaged by depressions, fragile and in need of his support, which is close to exhausting him, but he puts up with it. In fact he finds a certain irresistible pleasure in taking care of her, of being needed. She might not love him, after all why should she now if she did not before, but she needs him, and this often turns out to be an acceptable substitute. In the process we are once again brought into the orbit of her parents who come for a visit. The father is an invalid, a hypochondriac old selfish man, who is well taken care of by his wife, whose devotion to him, also fills a gap in her. Mr Knight, a curate, is indeed a hypochondriac, for ever anxious about his heart, his racing pulses rate, and ravaged by a horror of his blood pressure, so intense indeed that once when the cuff is put on him, he cries to have it taken away, he just cannot go through with it. Yes the BP is singularly suited to the temperamental fear of a hypochondriac. Yet for all his self-centeredness and absorption, he is uncannily insightful when it comes to sizing up people, which is of course rather a mystery. How could he, who has led such a sheltered and isolated life, been so worldly wise in certain respects. It could hardly be due to divine intervention and support. He is curious about his son-in-law. How does his career go along? Has he reached a stage to which he has dreamed about? Has his ambitions been indulged or has his daughter inhibited his rise?

Sheila is bored. She engages in certain projects, being reasonably well-off. One of them is that of a rather sly former publisher, once part of the smart scene, but not any longer. Would she be able to give him some money to get reestablished? He has projects, some of them very promising, and besides she too might want to get published. She adopts him, gives him money but then it transpires that he spreads humiliating rumors about her, rumors to the effect that she is supporting him out of vanity to get published herself. In fact she has written a novel, or something of such sort, but then she thought better of it and had it destroyed. Anyway, she gets enough of it and leaves it to Eliot to get her out of it, and remarkably the beneficiary complies and returns the money gifted to him. A little bit later she signs up for the war effort where her knowledge of French would come in handy. But she frets, will she be up to it? Maybe she should resign, it all seems so formidable. Our narrator Eliot tries to soothe and support her. One evening he accepts an invitation for dinner by a friend Cook who entertains him nicely. It is such a relief to be

away from home and he savors it greatly, in fact so much that he stays over night in order to avoid negotiating London streets in the dark, an arrangement he has already informed his wife about.

The next morning when he calls home no one answers. It does not really bother him, maybe she is just oversleeping. Then their housekeeper comes to the phone and he learns that his wife has committed suicide, that the housekeeper has come to her too late, she is already well dead since many hours. Of course she must have seized on her partners absence to commit the act, which would have been hard to do with him at home. And besides it adds to his guilt, the guilt of having enjoyed himself while she was dying. And also of having shirked his responsibility, of let his guard down.

A friend of his youth, a certain Charles March, one of the main characters in 'The Conscience of the Rich', who had given up his worldly ambitions in order to become a doctor (because as he had remarked, it is profession in which you do not have to be distinguished to do good and get satisfaction), is summoned. He wants someone he can trust. There is of course nothing to do, his wife is dead as dead can be; however March suggests that he can fake the death certificate and claim that her demise was natural, not a suicide. For the latter you need an inquest, and to have it known that his wife committed suicide would be hurting him, the only hitch is to what extent one can trust the house keeper Mrs Wilson. Eliot dissuades him to put his reputation at risk and eventually an inquest is arranged. Meanwhile his in-laws visit him, his mother-in-law naturally blaming him for not having sufficiently taken care of their daughter; while his father-in-law is more indulgent of his negligence, after all his daughter was never an easy character and he himself never manage to establishe a bond with her.

The narrative is fast-forwarded. We find Eliot being intrigued by a young woman by name of Margret Davidson, daughter of a noted art critic. She initially has been tagging along with Crook but who, in deference to him, renounces all claims on her. Eliot ascribes it to a lack of real sexual desire. An affair quickly develops with a sweetness he had never enjoyed before. But the ghost of Sheila invariably interferes, Margret does not want to become a new Sheila, a woman just serving his needs to look after and protect. There is unbelievable sweetness and bliss, but then one day she finds out that Sheila had committed suicide, and she wonders how could he have hidden it from her? It creates a rift between them, and our protagonist Eliot turns all his anger and frustration to Crook who has been such a busybody letting out secrets which should have been allowed to be hidden. In fact he takes measure to remove Crook from being one of his subordinates and requests to get another one. Crook is hurt and bewildered, what has he done to fall so abruptly from Eliot's grace? The man whom he has admired so, to some extent to the embarrassment of the protagonist, and to whom he had been so unselfishly devoted.

And now there is an opportunity to make a slight digression in the narrative. The new assistant that Eliot demands is his old friend and mentor George Passant, who is stuck, for life it seems, in an obscure low-paying job in a small town, providing no prospects of promotions. Time to rescue him and to get a new confidante, one whom he could trust in an unqualified way. Meanwhile the rift between he and Margret seems not to heal this time, and then one day she demands an interview with him at some neutral place. He waits for her and then she enters announcing that she is about to be married to a certain

Geoffrey, a pediatric doctor, of whom she has sometimes spoken of with approval and a certain longing, as he seemed to embody what she longed for, or thought she did, namely a conventional domestic life with children and a respectable professional who does good straightforward work. The curtain is lowered.

Eliot is stunned, but he cannot entirely forget her, in fact he is on the perpetual outlook for rumors about her, to the extent that he even enlists his old friend Crook from his exile to give him any possible news about her. Crook has of course too much pride to readily come to the rescue and resume old habits of friendship, but at least there is some bond, however tenuous. Eliot finds out that she is pregnant and skims the birth notices of the daily papers until he finally finds the one that stabs him.

A year or two later chance throws her father into his path. He is desirous to follow the lead this unexpected encounter provides and he wrangles an invitation to an art show to be held in Davidson's mansion although the host is very doubtful that he will be able to appreciate it properly. And here, among the visitors, he finally gets hold of Margret and later is introduced to her husband a tall fellow. One thing leads to another and he is invited to their home where he expects to find domestic bliss. There is a child on which the mother dotes and there is the doctor with whom he gets into an argument. The doctor wants to shut out the outside world, in particular by not reading newspapers, in order to have a life focused on the essentials, namely family and work. Eliot is scandalized by that and explains that it is an untenable position, and much to his surprise, Margret comes to the support of her husband. So we understand that the chapter is closed, she is entirely devoted to her new life of her domestic dreams and there is no place for Eliot. But then as he leaves there is a meeting of gazes and he understands that she feels as strongly about him and he about her, that the old spark may have been suppressed by an effort of will, but not extinguished, and what is not extinguished can flare up again.

So there is a meeting with Davidson again and Margret without her husband, and soon thereafter they start to meet clandestinely and an affair is in the making, strongly disapproved of by Margret's elder sister Helen, formerly a warm supporter of their pre-marital liaison. Margret too does not want to hurt her husband, the kindest and most considerate of men, and suggests that they keep on what they are doing staying the affair at a clandestine level. In other words she wants to having the cake and eating it. Eliot is opposed. Everything and nothing, and eventually his will prevails and there is a divorce and a remarriage, maybe surprising to most readers. And more significantly there is a child.

Meanwhile things are being winding down at the government offices at Whitehall, the urgency of the work to be performed has slackened. Whom of the assistants should they keep and give tenure as ordinary Civil Servants? Crook gets a position, people like him, he is no threat and of course useful. Passant is quite another animal, obviously intelligent, in fact highly intelligent, and also effective and imaginative and has done good work. He is sure that he will be kept, but when it comes to a decision, the small committee, including Herbert Rose, a man on whom Eliot is on very polite terms, to the point of effusiveness, but due to their immaculate correctness, somewhat cold and distant, no doubt hiding a certain personal antipathy, which the circumstances of work forbid to come out in the open. Rose admits Passants competence and high intelligence and there is a rather successful interview

that leaves the prospective employee in good hopeful mood; but when push comes to show, there is a lot of skepticism on the part of the hiring committee. Passant has of course many obvious virtues but is he really acceptable? Deep down they want conventional people whom they can trust to stay put within their proper boundaries, like cogs in well run machine. Had Passant been up for the office of Prime minister say, it would have been very different, in such a case being conventional is not necessarily a virtue, and they would have much less qualms about recommending him; but as a functioning piece in a large bureaucratic machinery, they have to have reliable smooth parts. And besides, the fact that a man of Passants obvious abilities has been stuck in such a insignificant job not only puzzles them but makes them deeply uneasy. What does it really mean? A lack of ordinary healthy ambition and *savoir faire*? Some deeper personal problems, such as a deep seated neurosis or maybe even pathology or some sinister streaks in his psychology? Apparently those can be tolerated in a Minister but not in a servant. Passant ends up rejected, much to his surprise; and forced to return to his dead-end position. The world are filled with men of high ability and talent, but who do not get ahead at all. Maybe because of a lack of ambition, or an unworldliness unaware of what it takes. But such men can be happy and content after all, Eliot reflects, somewhat ashamed of not having been able to do more for his friend, because once a man is able to live according to his nature, he is bound to be content with his lot not needing any outside social reassurance.

As the final climax of the book one has the sudden illness of their common child. An illness which is soon diagnosed, both by Eliot's friend Charles March and Margret's ex-husband, to be meningitis. In the past such an affliction was almost sure to lead to death, but now there is penicillin which is shot into the screaming body brutally. There is tension and the reader does not know, as little as the protagonists, what way things will tip. In the end the child recovers and Margret's man becomes a hero in the eyes of both, a gratitude that blots out the contempt and pity they both felt for somebody they had wronged. And I guess this is to be seen as the ultimate reconciliation out of which the humiliated ex-husband and pediatrician, can emerge triumphantly.

Due to the focus on personal sexual relations along with concomitant animal passions, such as the attachment to off-springs, instead of being on the subtle power play he usually concentrates on, this book has a vividness and a power to engage that many other book in the series lack. Snow may be best as what he does second best, namely the minute analysis of political and administrative power-play with its clashing of personalities and regrouping of alliances, at least there he is at his most original; but simple love-stories based on the egoistical callousness of sexual desire, holds after all a deeper fascination, and it takes less skill to engage the reader. However, seeing pictures of Snow in his old age, in fact old and decrepit already in his sixties, with a potbelly, seemingly out of breath with a dangling cigarette in a hand that may very well be shaking, one wonders what he has ever known about sexual desire. But as we all know appearances deceive. And that is after all a good thing.