

The Affair

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In many ways this is a rehash of 'the Masters' in the sense of looking closely at an academic crisis with all the intricate political maneuvers and changes of alliances. Snow remarks, or rather his alter ego Lewis Eliot, remarks that there is a difference in the fights between civil servants and academics. In the first case it is not really personal, and when it is, the personal issue is not allowed to come to the surface, while in academic circles, personal animosity is not merely suppressed, it is celebrated. Academics are both thin-skinned and aggressive, and they have to take a lot of abuse from their peers, something which government officials are spared. The academics also have a tendency to invest their quarrels with intricate subtleties and shrewd stratagems, in fact to become obsessed with them, in the same way as they are, at least in their happier moments, obsessed with their scholarly work. Thus shrewd arguments tend to cancel themselves out, so the ones who will eventually carry the day are not the shrewd ones, but those who have the strongest will power as well as stamina. When people have burned themselves out and become bored with their quests, those who still can muster energy and motivation to continue, will walk home with the prize.

A certain Howard, an elected young fellow, has been accused of scientific fraud, meaning doctoring the evidence. More specifically there is a forged picture in his thesis. A photo taken and being enlarged in order to buttress a claim, but the trick has been discovered by some American who have noticed that the mark left by a pin for drying was unusually large. Fraud is definitely not accepted in the scientific community, there is an investigation and a hearing, and the poor fellow is of course stripped of his fellowship and banned from the university. His wife takes it on herself to have the decision reversed and thus as a first step to have the matter reopened. This is how the book starts, and the prospects seem very bleak. Yet events take a surprising turn.

Howard has claimed that the photo was given to him by his professor and that he was innocent. The accusation that his professor, an old highly respected individual, should actually have committed a forgery, and to boot so late in his life, seems if anything far-fetched. In fact what could he have won by that, and indeed how much could he not have stood to lose as far as his impeccable reputation goes? The accusation is indeed preposterous. But then a younger fellow by name of Skeffield goes through the last batch of notebooks delivered out of the old advisor's *Nachlass* up in Scotland. In it he finds that a photo has been removed from the book. If that photo could have been a forged one, it would have buttressed the claims of Howard. Skeffield is no fan of the latter, in fact he finds him highly unlikable, as all other fellows of the college do, and not very smart, but this is irrelevant, no one should be unfairly condemned, likable or not. During an extended process more and more people come to the same conclusion, i.e. that Howard may be innocent after all and that the case should be reopened. Martin Eliot does so rather quickly, maybe mostly for the taste of a fight but more significantly, as well as

surprisingly, so does Frances Getliffe, a real scientific heavy-weight, and that turns the tide. From then on sufficient momentum has been gathered to force a re-opening of the case. Gerliffe does not come to this conclusion lightly, he is appalled by what he senses is the sheer stupidity of Howard. The opposition against re-opening is strong, it could severely damage the college, but in the end there is no alternative, the side for it has reached a slight majority. It is decided that Lewis Eliot, the narrator, should present the case for the acquittal of Howard in front of the Senior Fellows, while the case against it, will be left to another lawyer - Dawson-Smith - to represent. Eliot and Dawson-Smith know each other from the past, they were never intimate friends but were on friendly terms. Dawson-Smith is a cool character, still youthful suave and sure of himself, yet without being ridiculous. He will of course be a formidable opponent, because after all there will be competition between the two. Then there is an amusing, if somewhat sad, sideshow. Guy, the old historian of Iceland, and the most senior of them all, well into his ninth decade, gets wind of the seniors meeting without him. He is demented, but like academic men in dotage, still capable of shrewdness and the gift of articulation. Snow must have had plenty of opportunity to observe academics dimmed by advancing age, yet holding on to their dignity. The depiction of Guy's muddleness is masterly done. Guy is very upset and wants Eliot to bring a charge against them. The whole thing is resolved in a way that will humor the old man. Through old archives it is revealed that there is something such as a moderator in those cases, and he is duly appointed as such, and is as pleased as pie. And in fact as the proceedings are about to start they play a charade of visiting him giving giving him the illusion of being in charge and promising to deliver the verdict first to him. This is all what it takes to mollify him, but it takes some time with a cab outside idling in attendance.

Things do not go too well for Eliot and his side. Howard turns out to be a very uncooperative witness, in fact a terrible one, and his cause seems irreparably damaged. Dawson-Smith on the other hand has more luck and seems to carry the day. The lukewarmness with which Howard seems to pursue his science damns him in the eyes of his colleagues for whom the pursuit of truth is not a necessary chore but a calling. How could he just so uncritically received the photo from his professor without delving into it deeper? The situation is rather desperate and they decide to lay their trump card, a card that it is actually a bit unfair to play, as it will throw suspicions on one of the seniors themselves, a certain Nightingale, the bursar, who has been irrevocably opposed to Howard from the beginning and steadfastly refused to change his mind. Could it be that it was he who removed a photo from the notebooks, a forged photo which would prove the culpability of the advisor irrefutably. To do so would be to save the reputation of the latter and to make sure that Howard would be condemned. In short the guy has been framed. But who could play this card, not Eliot because he does not have enough authority, the only one to have it is Getliffe, but of course it will carry a correspondingly greater risk. For one thing Getliffe is almost sure to get elected master on the basis of his solid scientific reputation, but this could very well compromise him, and open the way for Brown. Getliffe does it nevertheless, and it causes great consternation, especially, needless to say, from Nightingale who feels singled out, although he is not mentioned by name. However, in the end it carries the day, sowing enough doubt in the mind of the master Crawford, who decides

to change it, and thereby there will be a majority for acquittal. Eliot has won, despite himself, but Dawson-Smith takes it gracefully, what else could you have expected.

The book ends on a comical note. They decide to carry out the farcical duty of informing Guy at his home, although none of the two cherishes it, least of all Dawson-Smith. When they arrive at his home they find him asleep. The maid is there telling them how much the professor has looked forward to their visit all day. They are reluctant to wake him up, and it would be cruel to leave him. Yet none can really afford to waste much more time. Dawson-Smith, for one, will miss the last train to London if he does linger on, and thereby give up the pleasures of another smart party to which he has been invited. In the end he decides to skip his plans after all and stay with the old professor until he wakes up. An gratuitous act of kindness, intended to surprise the reader as much as Eliot.

As noted Snow goes over old ground as if he had not done properly the first time. The charm lies in the slowness of the pace and the deliberate pronouncements, mostly on esoteric facts of intrapersonal psychology, which both strikes a note of authenticity and a doubt as to veracity, is he fooling the reader or fooling himself? There are, however, general observations which have the ring of truth, such as that people you have known since youth, never lose their youthful appearance. If you do not recognize them at first, the mask of old age, will obstruct your view, but once you have penetrated the mask, it will disintegrate, and you will **Wif Persson**: how they really are, i.e. how they looked in younger days.