Corridors of Power

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While 'The Masters' and 'The Affair' concern power-play and intrigue in academic settings, here we go for the real thing. While the stakes are low, but the engagement is deep to the point of being obsessive, in the first case, here, the stakes are very high, in a sense ultimately concerning the future of mankind in a nuclear age. More specifically, what should the British take be on nuclear armament? Should it join the arms race and try to maintain its status as a great power; or should it take a more aloof stand, and relinquish all such hopes as both being unrealistic and immoral? A new character is introduced, a relatively young upcoming politician, with a well-defined agenda, trying to save mankind from the bomb. His name is Roger Quaife, he is well-connected, having made a very good match to a rich aristocratic woman by name of Caro, and thanks to her now moving in influential circles. Quaife is a skilled politician, he knows what it takes and is as adept at playing the game, as any other skilled politician. Power is important, that is what the political game is all about, but power is not enough, you need to do something worthwhile with it, if for no other reasons than to feel that you have not lived in vain, that your deeds, if not necessarily you, will be remembered and will have mattered. Thus deeper down than the usual political skill there is a strong idealistic streak.

Quaife is befriended by our narrator Lewis Eliot, who is impressed by him, and fairly quickly manages to earn his trust and become a valued and intimate friend as far as politicians can be intimate with their friends.

Contrasting the exceptionally able Quaife we meet a variety of traditional and bumbling politicians such as the egregiously incompetent Gilbey (an old military hand) or the exceptionally inarticulate Collingwood. Those are indeed politicians, who for some reason wield a lot of power and influence without exhibiting any competence. Aristocratic connections still count a big deal in post war England. We also become privy to the rich widow Diana Skidmore, who regularly holds weekend saloons at her various abodes, be it the country estate Basset or her sumptuous, over furnished apartment in London. To those gatherings ministers are invited and sophisticated gossip is bandied around. To be included in that charmed circle is a privilege not even top politicians can only ignore at their peril. In fact politicians are like stock on the exchange, their values go up and down, and gatherings like those of Skidmore to a large extent drive those fluctuations. Thus you should look out for the rising ones, and Quaife is obviously one of those, not only ambitious and brilliant, but politically suave and intellectually non-negligible. He is up for a ministerial post, as soon as such would become vacant, and eventually no doubt constitute matter for the highest office at all available, namely that of the Prime minister-ship, foremost among equals. And if anything, he is making himself well-prepared for what might descend on him if he keeps to the upwards path.

His main concern is the nuclear policy he should pursue. For that reason he tried to collect distinguished scientists on a committee, among whom we not surprisingly encounter

Francis Getliffe and Walther Luke. Then there is a Polish exile - Michael Brodzinski, who has a reputation of being somewhat of a maverick, to put it mildly. He is all for a nuclear rearmament of Britain, in order to become so strong that the Soviet Union could be subdued. By responsible people, especially among the top-notch scientists, this is considered irresponsible, not to say recklessly adventurous, and it simply cannot be tolerated. Brodzinski is simply a maniac, not negligible as a scientist, but a catastrophe as a moral force. To their chagrin he is invited to preliminary meetings, the reason for that being that Quaife wants to include him, or at least give him the impression of being included as to placate him, in order to neutralize him and his influence. Thus a case of having a fellow inside your tent and pissing out, rather than the other way around. However, Brodzinski does not feel included but with his thin skin and readiness to notice a slight, however slight, and retreats playing his own game, pissing into the tent for all his worth, much to the detriment of Quaife's project.

Quaife is a conservative by temperament, while our narrator Eliot is depicted as a liberal having had strong leftist sympathies in the thirties. Although Quaife's policies earns the approval of the Labour opposition, such approval tends rather to damage his case among his fellow Tories, rather than bolster it. Within hisown party - the Tories - there is strong opposition to his scheme, the idea that Britain should play a major role in the affairs of the world is deeply ingrained, and consequently many Tories on the right fringe of the party are vehemently opposed to what they sense is a defeatist policy at best and a downright traitorous at worst.

Then there are the Civil servants working in Whitehall, where we find our narrator, although being among them, he is not really one of them. There is Hector Rose, whom we as readers have already met. A man given to excessive politeness, but below the surface of courtesy there is a hard, rather frigid core. Our narrator feels that Rose does not like him, and that relations between them, although cordial are never easy and comfortable. A certain David Osbaldiston on the other hand is much more to his liking, and the two of them strike up a friendship. Osbaldiston is also a career servant, younger than Rose, but already his equal in the byzantine hierarchies which inevitably form in large institutions, and very likely to go much further than Rose will ever do.

While Eliots first wife Sheila was a definite impediment to the career of the narrator, his second wife Margaret (introduced in 'Homecomings') is an asset providing not only emotional support but also sharing his interests in his job, at least when it comes to the gossipy side.

So what do we have? We have intrigue and running around in corridors, the corridors of power, to use a cliché coined by Snow himself. Wise, or at least seemingly wise, remarks are dropped all the time by the author using Eliot as his thinly veiled mouthpiece, giving the reader the illusion of being made privy to the inner secrets of government dealings, where so much come together, such as the academic and scientific world, the old-boys networks and also the world of business. The latter is exemplified in the novel by the character of Lufkin, the successful Tycoon, who is out for fat government contracts skillfully setting up a mutual dependence between private enterprise and governmental policies. Lufkin has of course appeared in earlier volumes and is depicted as a mixture of the naive and cynical, vain to the point of insatiability, but a surprisingly skilled judge of men and their

characters. Immensely rich of course, but indifferent to personal indulgence, savoring above all the feel of power.

Now there is an extra complication, an unexpected one, because Quaife, happily married to a a devoted and loyal wife, has enmeshed himself with another woman by name of Ellen, also married but living apart from her husband who has suffered some seemingly incurable mental breakdown. Our narrator is taken into the confidence of Quaife and has to play the rôle of a go between and common confidante to the couple. Why does Quaife do it? Why does he consent to take such risks? Admittedly such behavior is hardly unheard of in his wife's circles, in fact highly tolerated in principle, (in fact as Snow lets drop as one of his many remarks, both public and private transgressions are accepted, but not both at the same time). And also, when push comes to shove not necessarily met by such understanding by his wife, being directly affected. The affair which has happily gone on for three years, without the wife suspecting anything, seems to come to a crisis, as she, the mistress, has been receiving anonymous letters indicating knowledge of it, and thus opening the whole thing up to blackmail. This is of course a deep concern to Quaife, who will have to deal with that on top of his public obligations.

A White Paper is eventually produced by the scientific committee, and it has to be presented to the Parliament for a debate to be followed by a vote. This provides the climax of the story. Clearly Quaife has to carry the day otherwise he will be finished as a politician, not necessarily in the formal sense, he can always linger on, but having lost his influence, he will also lose what makes the life of a politician worthwhile, namely power.

So there are speeches, most of them humdrum, but one very aggressive is given by an obscure backbencher, and that had not been expected. Admittedly this by itself is of no importance whatsoever, but it could possibly have the effect of swinging a few votes and thus affect the final result. It transpires that Rose, although not a friend is an ally, he is also banking on that Quafie will carry it through, but Osbaldiston, his real friend, on the other hand, does not agree with the policy of Quaife and should not mind seeing his boss come to grief. And, maybe more to points, Quaife being out of the way, prepares the way for his own advancement. Public service apart, personal ambition can never be discounted

Quaife eventually concludes the debate, by giving a brilliant speech, but as it turns out to no avail. His speech may have been brilliant, but the ordinary member of the parliament is not. It might very well been ahead of its time, dispensing with the kind of stale rhetoric which survived in oratory British politics well into the fifties, but in spite of it staleness, such a traditional oratory may have gone over better and have been accepted.

Quaife loses and is finished. He has the choice between biting into the sour apple of defeat and start all over again but operating at a far more humble level, or to quit altogether, saving his dignity. He decides to do the latter, writing a brilliant letter of resignation to the P.M.. He rationalizes his decision with the thought that somebody else is bound later on to accomplish what he was denied. With a certain pride, not of resignation per se, but to still have the formalities at his disposal, he drops the letter into a deposition box and locks it, giving it to one of his assistants with the order to bring it to the P.M. The assistant, a young man, does it without suspecting what it is all about. This young man will soon serve his successor as competently and loyally as he has served him.

We later learn, as the book is coming to a close, that Quaife divorced his well-connected wife and married his Ellen, the little mouse of a woman, so likely to be underestimated, and of whose type his former wife had already warned ofat one of those innumerable dinner parties, which form the backbone of the social life of the powerful.

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