

\$1.65

# The Affair

A NOVEL BY

C. P. SNOW



# THE AFFAIR

C. P. SNOW

NEW YORK

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

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B-8.62[Col]

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 60-6324

NOVELS BY C. P. SNOW

陌生人们 兄弟們  
STRANGERS AND BROTHERS

THE LIGHT AND THE DARK 光明与黑暗

TIME OF HOPE

THE MASTERS

THE NEW MEN

HOMECOMING

THE CONSCIENCE OF THE RICH

These novels, and also

THE AFFAIR

form part of the sequence of novels entitled

STRANGERS AND BROTHERS

THE SEARCH

THE  
AFFAIR

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# I

## THE FIRST DISSENTIENT





AN UNSATISFACTORY  
EVENING

When Tom Orbell invited me to dinner at his club, I imagined that we should be alone. As soon as I saw him, however—he was waiting by the porter's box, watching me climb up the steps from the street—he said, in a confidential, anxious whisper: “As a matter of fact, I’ve asked someone to meet you. Is that all right?”

He was a large young man, cushioned with fat, but with heavy bones and muscles underneath. He was already going bald, although he was only in his late twenties. The skin of his face was fine-textured and pink, and his smile was affable, open, malicious, eager to please and smooth with soft soap. As he greeted me, his welcome was genuine, his expression warm: his big light blue eyes stayed watchful and suspicious.

He was telling me about my fellow-guest.

“It’s a young woman, as a matter of fact. Lewis, she is really rather sweet.”

I had forgotten that this club, like a good many others in London in the Fifties, had taken to letting women in to dine. While he was talking, I had no doubt at all that I was there to serve some useful purpose, though what it was I could not begin to guess.

“You’re sure you don’t mind?” Tom pressed me, as I was hanging up my coat. “It is all right, isn’t it?”

He led the way, heavy shoulders pushing forward, into the reading room. The room was so long, so deserted, that it seemed dank, though outside it was a warmish September

night and in the grates coal fires were blazing. By one fire, at the far end of the room, a man and woman were sitting in silence reading glossy magazines. By the other stood a young woman in a red sweater and black skirt, with one hand on the mantelpiece. To her Tom Orbell cried out enthusiastically:

“Here we are!”

He introduced me to her. Her name was Laura Howard. She was, as he had promised, comely. She had a shield-shaped face and clear grey eyes, and she moved with energy and grace. Tom got us sitting in armchairs on opposite sides of the fire, ordered drinks, <sup>(12)</sup>dumped himself on the sofa between us. “Here we are,” he said, as though determined to have a cosy drinking evening.

He proceeded to talk, flattering us both, using his wits and high spirits to get the party going.

I glanced across at Laura. One thing was clear, I thought. She had been as astonished as I was to find she was not dining alone with Tom Orbell: quite as astonished, and much more put out.

“When are you going to come and see us again?” Tom was addressing himself to me, tucking into a large whiskey. “We really do miss you, you know.”

By “us,” he meant the Cambridge college of which I had been a Fellow before the war. I still had many friends there, including my brother Martin, who was himself a Fellow, and went to see them two or three times a year. It was on one of those visits that I had first met Tom, just after he had taken his degree in history. He had made a reputation<sup>3,3</sup> as a bright young man, and I had heard my old friends saying that they would have to elect him. That had duly happened—so far as I remembered, in 1949, four years before this dinner in his club.

“We really do miss him,” Tom was explaining confidentially to Laura. “It’s like everywhere in this country, the right

people are never where you want them. Everything's got into the hands of those <sup>awful</sup> old men, and when anyone like Lewis comes along he goes and does something frightfully important and leaves the old men to sit on the heads of the rest of us. He's a very powerful and slightly sinister figure, is Lewis. Oh, yes, he is. But he's on the right side. I assure you he is. We miss him very much, do you believe me?"

"I'm sure you do," she said, in a tone which could scarcely have been less interested.

Tom continued to talk—was he trying to distract her?—as though we were all in a sociological conspiracy. Generalisations poured out: the good young middle-aged, said Tom, flattering me, for I was forty-seven, had got caught up trying to keep the country afloat. The generation coming up, he said, flattering her, for she was about thirty, had got to fight some other battles, had got to smash the "awful old men."

"We are all in it together," he said. He had had three stiff drinks, he sounded both hearty and angry. "We're going to show them. I mean it very sincerely, both of you."

Upstairs in the dining-room, with Laura sitting between us at a dark corner table, Tom went on with his patter. There were a couple of decanters waiting for us, shining comfortably under the three candles, and soon Tom had put down the best part of a bottle of wine. But, though he showed the effects of drink very quickly, he did not get any more drunk. He was spontaneous, as he usually seemed to be, but whatever his policy was for this evening he had not lost hold of it. He was spontaneous, at the same time he was wily: somehow he managed to use the spontaneity as part of his stock-in-trade.

Meanwhile he was enjoying his dinner with a mixture of appetite and discrimination, with a gusto so intense that he appeared to be blushing. After he had ordered our meal with analytical care, he suddenly had a second thought about his own. Beckoning the waitress, he whispered to her almost as confidentially as though they were having a love-affair. She

reappeared with some gulls' eggs while Laura and I forked away at the smoked salmon.

"Delicious, delicious," said Tom Orbell, in a gourmet's transport.

It was when he repeated this performance over the savoury that Laura lost her patience. As he talked at large, she had been half-polite, half-sulking. Not that she was irritated because he was not paying attention to her as a woman. Actually, he was. He was a susceptible young man, he wanted to make a hit with her. To which she was totally indifferent; something was on her mind, but not that.

Tom had just had a new and delectable afterthought about the savoury. When our mushrooms on toast arrived, he had another piece of happy whispering with the waitress. "Do you think I could possibly have . . .?" Soon he was munching away at chicken livers and bacon, murmuring with content.

Then Laura said to him:

"I do want to get down to business, if you don't mind."

Tom looked at her, his glance at the same time defensive and bold: *442*

"Is there really anything we can do to-night?"

"When are any of you going to move?"

"It isn't any use me moving by myself, is it?"

"That's not the point."

"But isn't it the point, my dear? Do you think that the blasted Court of Seniors is going to listen to a solitary junior Fellow? Remember this is the last shot you've got, if you don't mind me speaking frankly. And I'm speaking with great affection for you, even more than for Donald, and that isn't a monstrous thing to say, is it?"

She was looking angry and determined, which made her seem more handsome, and he gazed at her admiringly. "Forgive me," he said, "I'm afraid I'm slightly drunk." He was not: he was trying to put up a smoke-screen.

"If you don't mind me speaking very frankly, you've got

to be very, very careful about your tactics," he went on. "And so have I, because there might come a time when I could be a bit of use to you, in a minor way, and it would be a mistake to have shot my bolt before the right time came, wouldn't it?"

"Not so much a mistake as doing nothing at all."

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't let Lewis into this?" he said, beating another retreat.

"Haven't you heard about it already?" Almost for the first time, she spoke to me directly.

In fact, as I had been listening to them, I knew something of the story. My brother was the most discreet of men: but he and Francis Getliffe had thought that, as an ex-Fellow, I had a right to know. Even so, they had told me the bare minimum. The scandal had been kept so tightly within the college that I had not caught a whisper from anyone else. All I had picked up was that one of the younger Fellows had been caught out in a piece of scientific fraud. Without any noise at all, he had been got rid of. It was a kind of dismissal that had only happened in the college once within living memory. It had been done, of course, after something like a judicial investigation. I assumed that it had been done with more obsessive care even than in a process at law. The final dismissal had happened six months before: and, as I had realised as soon as Laura set to work on Tom Orbell, the man concerned was her husband, Donald Howard.

I said that I knew what they were talking about.

"Have you heard that it's a piece of unforgivable injustice?" she demanded.

I shook my head.

"You've got to remember, just for the sake of getting your own tactics right," said Tom, "that no one in the college takes that view, haven't you got to remember that?"

"Have you heard that it's the result of sheer blind prejudice?"

I shook my head again, and Tom put in:

"With great respect, my dear Laura, that's just misleading you. Of course there's some strong feeling about it, it wouldn't be natural if there wasn't. Of course most of them don't agree with his opinions. I don't myself, as you know perfectly well. But then, I don't agree with Lewis's opinions either, and I think Lewis would feel pretty safe in his job if I suddenly came into power. Speaking with great affection, you're really on the wrong track there."

"I don't believe it for an instant."

"Truly you're wrong—"

"I will believe it when you've done something to prove it."

I watched them as she went on bullying him. Tom Orbell was as clever as they came; psychologically he was full of resource and beneath the anxiety to please there was a tough, wilful core. But his forehead was sweating, his voice was not so mellifluous or easy. He was frightened of her. While she sat there, pretty, set-faced, strong-necked, she had only one thought in her head. She had come to talk to him and make him act. Talking to Tom, who was so much cleverer, she had the complete moral initiative.

She said: "I'm not asking you anything difficult. All I want is to get this business re-opened."

"How can you expect me to do that? I'm just one out of twenty, I'm a very junior person, I'm not a majority of the college. And I've tried to explain to you, but you won't realise it, that you're dealing with a society and a constitution, that you need a majority of the college before the thing can be so much as raised again."

"You can't get a majority of the college unless you make a beginning now," she said.

Tom Orbell looked at her with something like appeal. I thought she had got him down. Then I realised that I had underrated him, when he said:

"Now look, my dear. I've got a serious suggestion to make,

and I want you to consider it very carefully. I don't believe that anyone as junior as I am is going to make any impact on this situation at all. What I suggest, and I mean it very deeply, is that you should try to persuade Lewis here to talk to some of his friends. I'm not saying that you could possibly want him to commit himself to an opinion one way or another, any more than I could commit myself, as far as that goes. But if you could get him so much as to raise the question with the people he knows—after all, he's become the nearest approach we have to an elder statesman, has Lewis. He can talk to them as I can't possibly and shan't be able to for twenty years. I do mean that, I assure you."

So now I understood why he had enticed me there.

She looked at me with steady, bright, obstinate eyes.

"You don't see much of them there nowadays, do you?" she asked.

"Not very much," I said.

"You can't possibly be really in touch, I should think, can you?"

I said no.

"I don't see what you could expect to do."

She said it dismissively and with contempt. Contempt not for Tom Orbell, but for me. I felt a perceptible pique. It was not agreeable to be written off quite so far. But this young woman had decided that I was no good at all. She did not seem even to be considering whether I was well-disposed or not. She just had no faith in me. It was Tom in whom she still had her faith.

When we returned to the reading-room, even she, however, was deterred from forcing him any more. Tom sat there, his face cherubic, sketching out visions of the future like roseate balloons, high-spirited visions that seemed to consist of unworthy persons being ejected from positions of eminence and in their places worthy persons, notably the present company and in particular Tom himself, installed. I thought Laura



would start on him again as soon as she got him alone. But for that night, at any rate, he was secure. For he had revealed to us that he was staying in the club, and at last it became my duty to take Laura out into Pall Mall and find her a taxi.

She said a cold good-night. Well, I thought, as I went along the street, looking for a taxi for myself, it would not be easy to invent a more unsatisfactory evening. None of the three of us had got away with what he wanted. Laura had not cornered Tom Orbell. He had not managed to slide her off on to me. And I had not done any better. I was not much interested in the story of her husband: it did not even begin to strike me as plausible that there had been an injustice of that kind. No, I was not thinking of that at all, but I was faintly irked. No one likes to be treated as a vacuum inhabited solely by himself.