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C.P. SNOW



IN THEIR WISDOM

A N O V E L

IN
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WISDOM



C. P. Snow

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IN THEIR WISDOM

About the Author

Born in Leicester, England, in 1905, C. P. Snow was educated at Leicester University College and then at Christ's College, Cambridge, where he held a fellowship in physics and later became tutor. His first published works were scientific papers, particularly on infrared investigations of molecular structures. His serious career as a novelist began in 1934 with the publication of *The Search*; the next year he started to plan the *Strangers and Brothers* sequence of eleven novels.

At the outbreak of World War II, Snow entered public affairs; and for his services—as adviser on scientific personnel to the Ministry of Labour and afterward as a Civil Service Commissioner—he was knighted in 1957. In 1967 he became Lord Snow and served in the government as Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Technology. He died in 1980.

C. P. Snow's works available from Macmillan Publishing Company include *The Realists*, *In Their Wisdom*, *A Coat of Varnish*, and the complete *Strangers and Brothers* sequence.

I wish to record several different kinds of indebtedness to Dr. Irving S. Cooper of St. Barnabas Hospital, New York City. He has taught me a great deal, directly and in other ways. Without him and his own writings, one theme in this book would not have been written.



PART ONE



❧ 1 ❧

Mr. Skelding was doing what some men would have found more difficult. He was announcing, with an air of Adamic surprise, as though, he alone among men had been granted this revelation, news which at least two of his audience knew as well as he did. And which revelation, since Mrs. Underwood was to execute the will along with himself, he couldn't help knowing that they knew.

Still, there was well-being in some places round the room. Mrs. Underwood listened without expression, sepia gaze concentrated on Mr. Skelding, facial muscles firm, handsome, confident and commanding in her middle sixties, looking as though she should have been accompanied by a lady-in-waiting carrying her purse. Her son Julian was also well-preserved, seemed much less than forty, as he peered, light eyes wide open, enquiring, as though he too were startled by the Adamic surprise. But it was not from those two that well-being wafted back to Mr. Skelding, echoing his own. Apart from the Underwoods there were six others whom Mr. Skelding had asked to call on him that afternoon. Some were sitting on the window seats, others backed against the white painted panelling; the office was suitable for subdued legal interviews, not for a party this size. That, however, did not inhibit Mr. Skelding. He enjoyed telling people that they were due to receive money they did not expect. He also enjoyed issuing warnings about obstacles in the jungly path before money could be taken as

certain. For once, that afternoon the business was simple, his good nature was genuine and he could let it flow.

It was a warm day in October, one of the sash windows was open; through it, in the gaps between Mr. Skelding's modulated, rounded, deliberate lawyer's phrases, one could hear a muted background noise, which those who knew the geography would have identified as the sound of traffic in the Strand, getting on for half a mile away. In the court below the sun was shining. For an instant Julian Underwood, in the midst of his reckonings, caught a smell from the outside air, or thought he did. There wasn't a tree in the Old Court, but it might have been the smell of burning leaves. Whether he was imagining it or not, it brought back to Julian, who wasn't a nostalgic man, days, or perhaps a solitary day, when he was a student and had returned after travelling, back to England in time for term, with the autumn weather as benign and bright as this.

Mr. Skelding proceeded. His colouring was high, puce cheeks making small shrewd eyes sink deeper in. His lips were as fresh as a child's, and would have looked just as much at home sucking on a straw: which was the one respect in which Julian Underwood resembled him, for he too in his pale over-youthful face had childish lips, over-innocent they had sometimes been called, though others got the opposite impression.

Although Mr. Skelding was enjoying himself, he preserved a decent steadiness of tone and pace. After all, the old gentleman had been buried only a couple of days before. No doubt people in this room would be gratified by their legacies, but some, Mr. Skelding thought, might have had an affection for him. He hadn't been an easy man. Yet Mrs. Underwood for one had for years been devoting most of her life to him. Like a very good secretary. He had treated her like that, though Mrs. Underwood was what Mr. Skelding in his old-fashioned way would have called good county family, not outfaced anywhere. A secretary might have been forced to put up with it, but Mrs. Underwood had money of her own. Of course there had been sound reasons. Mr. Skelding wasn't given to passing judgments upon his fellow men, or at least if he did so he managed to conceal them from himself.

Gazing round the room he exuded a proper, subdued excite-

ment as he broke morsels of news. He beamed, gleamed, and shone. The late Mr. Massie, he was saying, hadn't wished his will to be read at the funeral reception. That had never been a good custom. But he had given instructions for certain messages to institutions to be made known. These were included in his final will, which Mr. Skelding had drawn up. He had been present, when it was signed and witnessed a month before Mr. Massie's death.

"I don't think it's necessary to burden you with all the minor bequests. There are a number of objects mentioned which he had acquired over a long life time. Mrs. Underwood and I thought it would meet his wishes if I disclosed his statements about certain institutions to which I shall shortly be obliged to write."

Mr. Skelding pushed back his spectacles and drew the paper nearer.

"In effect," he said, "he required his school and college to be informed that he had at one period, a considerable number of years ago contemplated making testamentary dispositions for their benefit, and had entered into preliminary conversations with them on this subject. However, their lack of resistance to the stupidities of the present time"—he insisted on that form—"added to the irritation of living through his ninth decade. So he had decided to cease his connection with them, in particular to cease his connection with the Anglican church he was brought up in. He repudiated any thought of providing benefactions for them or any other institutions, and he expected those of similar opinions to himself to do the same."

Mr. Skelding gave this report without emphasis. He had trained himself to suppress any opinions of his own. That wasn't much of a sacrifice, if it meant his clients trusted him more. He glanced towards Mrs. Underwood, who was sitting near his desk.

"I think that is a reasonable summary?" She nodded, and said also without emphasis:

"Of course, you will send them the whole passage verbatim, won't you?"

"Of course," said Mr. Skelding. They spoke as though the recipients would resent being deprived of a single word.

"Well now," Mr. Skelding remarked comfortably, "we come into smooth water." He began to read from the second page:

"I wish to express my gratitude and give a token of recognition to those persons who have attempted to protect me from the stupidities and irritations of recent years." Attention in the room sharpened: this was getting warm. Some were thinking, the old man had sounded acerb, cross-grained to the last. No mention of his family. There were rumours that his daughter hadn't come near him. He had complained, someone had heard, at second-hand, of how she had treated him. She had been no use to him. None of them knew her, they had only become acquaintances of Mr. Massie in the last few years. A woman had been present at the funeral, pale, middle aged, solitary. That might have been her.

"Well then—" Mr. Skelding beamed at a large beak-nosed man. "To my doctor—" name in full, qualifications, address—"who has saved me from some unnecessary discomforts, I bequeath the sum of £5,000." The doctor did not beam in return but inclined his head.

"To my accountant—" a similar rubric—"who had dealt with incompetent officials, I bequeath the sum of £3,000." Four other legacies, one to his housekeeper, who had been with him only three years, also £3,000, one to his chiropodist, of £500. All six received their tips with decorum, like well trained hall porters at a grand hotel, with decorum and radiating satisfaction under the skin: except for the chiropodist, who couldn't hold back a large protuberant grin.

"To conclude," said Mr. Skelding, and returned to the text. "I wish above all to pay a debt of gratitude which I cannot properly express to my friend Mrs. Katharine Underwood for sympathy, support, and kindness beyond measure during my last years. At her request I do not bequeath her any sum of money. She has consented to act as an executrix of this my last will and testament. The residue of my estate, all preceding legacies having been discharged, I leave to her son Julian Stourton Underwood, Apartment D, 22 Philimore Gardens, London, W. 8."

Mr. Skelding had maintained to the last his aura of beatific astonishment, as though the final disposition was dazzlingly

fresh, not only to the Underwoods but to himself. Neither mother nor son stirred but Julian gave a blink, leaving his eyes, if that were possible, wider open still. There was a faint susurration somewhere in the room.

Mr. Skelding said: "I think that is almost all, then—unless anyone has any questions—? I do hope you don't feel that we have wasted your time." This was uttered earnestly, without any edge at all, the tone of one who had long ago ceased to obtrude himself upon apprehensive clients.

"Not in the least," murmured the doctor, like the chairman of a deputation moving a vote of thanks.

"Well—well—" Mr. Skelding said it restfully, a restful encouragement for them to leave.

The doctor took his cue and got up, and went over to shake hands. The others followed his lead as a social arbiter. Soon the Underwoods were left alone with Mr. Skelding.

"How much? How much will it be?" said Julian, while footsteps were still sounding down the stairs.

Mr. Skelding looked at Julian's mother, beaky of profile, eyes bird-like and brilliant. That was the one thing she didn't know; a solicitor whom Mr. Skelding had replaced still handled the old man's investments. She must have made her guess. She understood money as well as a professional. Caution intervened.

"It's early days to give any sort of figure," said Mr. Skelding. "And much of the estate is in equities, and of course the market is going down. I don't think we should be wise to give a figure."

"Don't let's be wise," said Julian with a sudden hooting laugh. "Just let's have an idea."

"We can do that, can't we?" said Mrs. Underwood.

"It's distinctly premature—"

"Not for working purposes," she said.

"If you press me—"

"Yes."

"Well then. Very roughly, though you mustn't hold me to this, the total estate may perhaps work out at a little over £400,000. The residual estate, when the other legacies are paid, might come to something slightly under."

"Much under?" Julian interjected.

"With good fortune, not so much under."

Julian made an acquiescent noise.

"But here's the body blow." Mr. Skelding, who relished speaking of large sums, also relished checking signs of undue grandeur.

"The realty isn't substantial, so the death duties are certain to be high. It would be safe to assume that they will swallow up half the final figure. We oughtn't to make calculations at having anything over £200,000, and it would be prudent to think more in terms of twenty or thirty thousand less than that."

Julian sat, lips parted, eyes wide. Mrs. Underwood went in for some brisk exchanges with the lawyer. Estimate of death duties? No, he couldn't get any nearer for the moment. Fall in value of the investments? Yes, it was important to get probate granted in quick time. Some of the portfolio ought to have been sold long before. They must be disposed of. The capital value had gone down by ten per cent over the past year. Mrs. Underwood nodded. She had realised that, or suspected it.

The only sensible step was to rush the probate through. Mr. Skelding would keep in touch. With that agreed, the Underwoods walked through the court in the amiable October air. Until they got into a taxi in Chancery Lane, Julian did not speak. Then he said:

"Sinful."

"What do you mean?" But she had been expecting this. She was on the defensive already.

"Those death duties."

"I told you."

"You didn't tell me they would be as high as this."

"That I didn't know. I'm sorry, darling."

"Shouldn't you have known?"

"It really was rather difficult, don't you see? I couldn't find out everything—"

His face was averted, staring ahead at traffic lights in the Strand.

"What's the use of a man making money? If they take it all away? Why do people sit down under it?"

"It's been going on for a long time, you know." She was trying to placate him, like a wife in a quarrel with her husband, hoping to bring out a smile.

He still wasn't looking at her, his profile stayed mutinous.

"Couldn't you have done something about it? There must be ways of shedding the stuff. This is pretty fair incompetence, it must have been."

"There are ways, darling, if you start soon enough. He'd have to have made gifts seven years ago. That was before I really knew him. And anyway people always think there's plenty of time."

Julian showed a flicker of interest.

"Shall you think there's plenty of time? Shall I? Will it all go down the drain?"

At that, Mrs. Underwood, keyed to all his intonations, was encouraged. She began explaining some points in the law of inheritance taxation. She did it more masterfully than Mr. Skelding would have done, but she spoke in an intimate tone, or as though intimacy were returning. Then, a step more daring, she said:

"And after all you are not doing so badly out of the deal, are you now? When you add it all up?"

Suddenly he gave his hooting laugh, so loud that the taxi driver, going round Trafalgar Square, looked back over his shoulder.

"Ho! Ho! Like a man who has just been told," Julian was spluttering, exploding with hilarity, "that he has been presented with a small fortune in New York and Paris. But is miserable because his account has been blocked in Addis Ababa."

He turned to his mother with an impudent, shameless, penitential smile. She smiled back, total complicity between them. It had been like this, his moods had changed as fast, since he was a child. Perhaps it was so, with the women he seemed to captivate. She didn't know he was capable of what sounded like ultimate confession and at the same time of keeping his secrets.

Anyway, with herself, she couldn't help but recognise, he had always been the dominant one. Since he was a very young man. It was she who was competent, to whom business came

easy, who could handle money and make it work: while he, though he was something of a miser, ingenious at not paying for a meal or a round of drinks, had never earned much of a living, and lived—again, how he lived she didn't know—on what she allowed him. It was also she who contrived for him, who made plans for what she imagined he wanted, all the time scheming for his love. Often she had been afraid that she would lose him. He hadn't given her much reason to be afraid. He sometimes was elevated on to what seemed like a cloud of his own, but mostly he was kind to her and, as now, sitting beside her in amity up Piccadilly, made her spirits light.

"What shall you do with it when you get it?" she asked.

He put a finger to the side of his nose.

"We shall feel our way."

"I think you might stand yourself a drink."

"Perhaps."

She had been teasing him. Again her tone was wife-like, but that of a wife now happy. He was abstemious, much more so than she was.

"Do you know?" All of a sudden he broke out in elation.

"What?"

"I shall buy a ham. A whole ham."

The curious thing, if she knew him at all, was that he might do just that.

"You could run to it."

"I've always wanted a ham."

The mouth of Knightsbridge. Friendly silence. Tentatively she said:

"You'll be able to marry Liz. If you want to."

"I'd thought of that."

This was a routine conversation. Conscientiously she had told him that she had longed to see him married long before.

She said: "I'd like to see my grandchildren before I die."

That also had been said before. He gave a soothing murmur.

Past Harrods. Friendly silence again. As they turned into the Kensington streets she asked if she was to expect him for dinner that night. No, he thought not, with a roseate secret smile.

They drew up in Victoria Road, outside her smart house,

shining with fresh cream paint, chrysanthemums in the window boxes. After he kissed her goodbye, out of old habit she paid the taxi to take him on to the other side of the High Street.