## "AN AFFAIR OF STATE"

Mr. J. C. Snaith is one of the few contemporary novelists who can always be trusted to hold some sort of a surprise in reserve for each new book. He refuses to be definitely labelled as the producer of any one specified type of fiction; and in consequence he is always stimulating, even if his successive experiments are of widely different degrees of merit. His latest volume, *An Affair of State*, is in its conception and purpose easily the most ambitious attempt that he has yet made. It is nothing less than a portrayal of the present-day political life in England, with the Parliament Buildings ever looming up in the back of the stage setting, cabinet ministers, foreign ambassadors, even the King himself, playing prominent parts in the central drama, and the rise and fall of parties, the clamour of public opinion, the insistent intrusion of the burning questions of the hour all uniting toward the one end of producing a picture that is vitally alive, a counterfeit presentment of a nation passing through a crisis that almost tricks us into forgetting that it is sheer invention. And yet, frankly, the book falls short of real bigness. In thinking it over afterward, you realise that Mr. Snaith did not have anything sufficiently momentous to say to justify his ambitious preparations, his spectacular stage setting. Excepting in the most general way, his book is not based on contemporary history; it is not a *roman à clef;* if any of his statesmen are drawn from life, if any of the party issues and party machinations reflect present-day actualities, the only useful purpose served is to convey a greater impression of verity. Because what Mr. Snaith is trying to do is not to tell England how to solve her problems, but merely to relate some interesting private and domestic complications between two families who happen to be closely concerned with public affairs, and whose personal quarrels are in consequence a detriment to the public welfare. The kernel of the whole difficulty may be stated quite briefly: Draper, a born statesman and orator, sprung from the people, has married into the aristocracy, and in consequence has gone over to the opposite party, with the double zeal of the convert. He loves his wife, Aline, but he appreciates the cleverness of Evelyn Rockingham, whom he does not love, and who, from a mixture of motives, decides to make him Prime Minister of England. Rockingham, Evelyn's husband, covets this position for himself, not selfishly, but because he believes that his party is safer in his hands than in Draper's. Consequently he stops at nothing, in order to discredit his opponent, even blackening the name of his own wife, in order that the scandal shall destroy Draper's popularity. The final situation is well worked up; you get a vivid sense of the tensity of a nation on the brink of civil war, as the days go by and no party, and no coalition of parties succeeds in breaking the deadlock and forming a ministry. And when Rockingham is finally made to see that Draper and no one else can save the country, he is so hedged around with pledges to his friends and treacheries to his foes, that if he yields, if he retracts, if he vindicates Draper, he cannot as a man with even a remnant of honour live to see the light of another day. This is the reason that a purely personal and family matter culminates in a suicide and is raised to the dignity of an Affair of State. And the chief reason why the whole story lacks bigness is that the specific story is not one that in its very nature demands the lofty setting of Parliament Buildings and Privy Coun-

cils; the same essential situation might have been as fittingly developed within the humbler circles of a Mayor and Board of Aldermen.

But, in point of technique, there is one feature about the volume in question that deserves special attention: the story is told almost wholly in the form of conversation. We see hardly any of the action at first hand; we get the chief incidents twenty-four hours later, when we hear Draper discuss them with Evelyn Rockingham, or Evelyn's husband tells them to Aline, or somebody writes a letter to some one else. And the structural advantage of this indirect method in a story of modern politics is just this: that it brings it all more closely within our own every-day experience. We are most of us unaccustomed to attend Parliament and to be present at meetings of Cabinet Officers; but we are in the habit of reading about them in the newspapers, and hearing them discussed quite irresponsibly by outsiders, and joining in ourselves, when we feel inclined. And the net result is that an event which, if narrated directly by a novelist, would sound preposterous, becomes almost commonplace when he lets us hear two or more people casually gossiping about it. Accordingly, whatever value the new volume by Mr. Snaith may have as a novel, it does have a very special interest as an object-lesson in technique.