

Melodrama of Fleet Street's most wanted man

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By James Fox

WHILE the national newspaper industry was gearing itself last week for a historic leap forward into a new technological age with talk of computers replacing old machinery, a very old-fashioned skirmish, worthy of bloodier days, was taking place in Fleet Street.

It began with a savage raid by one ancient weekly magazine on the writing stable of another, and its dramatic denouement involved the placing of a spy at the front door of The Observer newspaper and an angry confrontation in El Vino, Fleet Street's famous tavern.

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NEW STATESMAN
Alexander Chancellor, editor of The Spectator, and friend and appointee of its new and wealthy owner, Henry Keswick, had approached the New Statesman's two star writers, Auberon Waugh and political commentator Alan Watkins. He offered them both substantial pay increases and, to his mild surprise, they both leaped to the bait.

By the middle of last week Waugh and Watkins were pleased and confident, and it remained only to sign on the dotted line. Mr Keswick was puffing at his cigar in his beautifully furnished office in Lombard Street, where he is chairman of Matheson & Co, the London end of Jardine Matheson of Hong Kong, from where he returned recently with a fortune upwards of £20 million. Circulation was rising. Messrs Watkins and Waugh were in the bag. "It's going rather well," he said.

A mile away in his office in Great Turnstile, the New Statesman's editor, Tony Howard, was far from happy. In Auberon Waugh he was losing one of the most original columnists now in print, and in Alan Watkins — who happens to be his brother-in-law — a highly specialised political writer, whose talent for mixing inside gossip with hard political analysis has made him a rarity on Fleet Street and a circulation puller for the Statesman. "On Tuesday," says Mr Howard, "I felt angered, dejected and cross. I was irritated at the game Chancellor was playing with Keswick's money."

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Whatever Mr Howard did then can only be mulled over in Fleet Street hostleries. But the result was that Alan Watkins, far from joining The Spectator, is now almost certainly to be hired as political columnist of The Observer, a lifelong ambition for him but a bitter disappointment for The Spectator's managers.

In three days of swift action, Mr Watkins found his salary almost doubled, with cheque books still being waved in his face as he went home on Friday night. The deal with The Observer, he says, is still under negotiation. The Spectator is sure, however, that it has lost.

When Mr Watkins told Mr Howard of The Spectator's offer, he fully expected the Statesman to match it. He was receiving £4,700 a year and The Spectator's offer was £6,000. But Mr Howard

was unwilling to go more than halfway.

On Wednesday evening Mr Howard met Donald Treford, editor of The Observer, at a reception for the Foreign Minister of Sweden at the Savoy. Next day, apparently out of the blue, Mr Treford rang Mr Watkins and discussed the possibility of a job at The Observer.

On Friday, the Evening Standard carried the rumour that Mr Watkins had been seduced by The Observer. Early that afternoon Mr Chancellor was professing complete ignorance of any Observer moves to get his man. Around 5 pm Mr Watkins rang him to say that he was to have a drink with Mr Treford at 6.15. Before Mr Chancellor could warn him of the unwisdom of his actions, the Spectator switchboard operator cut off the call, closed down the switchboard and went home.

Mr Chancellor, unable to reach Mr Watkins, began a final desperate move. He called Mr Keswick and told him of the situation. Mr Keswick, George Hutchinson, deputy editor of The Spectator, and Mr Chancellor then gathered in El Vino, having placed Geoffrey Wheatcroft, publishing boss of the magazine, outside the door of The Observer to follow Mr Treford to his secret assign-



Watkins: "In the bag"

ment with Mr Watkins—it was in the Blackfriar pub next door to The Observer.

At that meeting, Mr Wheatcroft suddenly appeared. "I don't wish to interrupt your conversation," he said, "but certain gentlemen are waiting to see you at El Vino's."

There Mr Watkins was greeted by an imposing committee of Old Etonians, dominated by the large figure of Mr Keswick, who told him that he had behaved very badly, that he was a dishonourable cad. Mr Chancellor was looking depressed. Mr Keswick offered to top anything The Observer had offered. When Mr Watkins refused he said: "Well, what do you want? Do you want me to give you the newspaper?" Fifteen minutes later, Mr Watkins disappeared into the night, leaving a despondent crowd at the bar.

"If it was a plot against us," said Howard, "it backfired against its perpetrators. If Chancellor can't guess what has happened, he's a fool. Of course I had to defend the New Statesman, and the easiest way was to deflect the attack to a less tiresome quarter. Alan going to the Observer poses no problem. I was also a great admirer and fan of Auberon Waugh and I will miss him, although I suppose I could say that I originally pinched him from The Spectator in 1973."

Mr Chancellor said yesterday: "Alan had agreed to come, and the answer is that there is some disappointment. But we wish him well."