CHAPTER I

INTRODUCES MR. PARHAM AND SIR BUSSY WOODCOCK

For a time Mr. Parham was extremely coy about Sir Bussy Woodcock's invitation to assist at a séance.

Mr. Parham did not want to be drawn into this séance business. At the same time he did not want to fall out of touch with Sir Bussy Woodcock.

Sir. Bussy Woodcock was one of those crude plutocrats with whom men of commanding intelligence, if they have the slightest ambition to be more than lookers-on at the spectacle of life, are obliged to associate nowadays. These rich adventurers are, under modern conditions, the necessary interpreters between high thought and low reality. It is regrettable that such difficult and debasing intervention should be unavoidable, but it seems to be so in this inexplicable world. Man of thought and man of action are mutually necessary —or, at any rate, the cooperation seems to be necessary to the man of thought. Plato, Confucius, Machiavelli had all to seek their princes. Nowadays, when the stuffing is out of princes, men of thought must do their best to use rich men.

Rich men amenable to use are hard to find and often very intractable when found. There was much in Sir Bussy, for example, that a fine intelligence, were it not equipped with a magnificent

self-restraint, might easily have found insupportable. He was a short ruddy freckled man with a nose sculptured in the abrupt modern style and a mouth like a careless gash; he was thickset, a thing irritating in itself to an associate of long slender lines, and he moved with an impulsive rapidity of movement that was startling often and testified always to a total lack of such inhibitions as are inseparable from a cultivated mind. His manners were—voracious. When you talked to him he would jump suddenly into your pauses, and Mr. Parham, having long been accustomed to talk to muted undergraduates, had, if anything, developed his pauses. Half the good had gone from Mr. Parham if you robbed him of these significant silences. But Sir Bussy had no sense of significant silences. When you came to a significant silence, he would ask, "Meantersay?" in an entirely devastating manner. And he was always saying, "Gaw." Continually he said it with a variety of intonations, and it never seemed to be addressed to anyone in particular. It meant nothing, or, what was more annoying, it might mean anything.

The fellow was of lowly extraction. His father had driven a hansom cab in London, while his mother was a nurse in a consumption hospital at Hampstead—the "Bussy" came from one of her more interesting patients—and their son, already ambitious at fourteen, had given up a strenuous course of Extension Lectures for an all-time job with a garrulous advertisement contractor, because, said he, there was "no *go* in the other stuff."

The other "stuff," if you please, was Wordsworth, the Reformation, Vegetable Morphology and Economic History as interpreted by fastidious-minded and obscurely satirical young gentlemen from the elder universities.

Mr. Parham, tolerant, broad-minded, and deliberately quite modern, was always trying to forget these things. He never really forgot them, but whenever he and Sir Bussy were together he was always trying very hard to do so. Sir Bussy's rise to wealth and power from such beginnings was one of the endless romances of modern business. Mr. Parham made a point of knowing as little about it as possible.

There the man was. In a little less than a quarter of a century, while Mr. Parham had been occupied chiefly with imperishable things—and marking examination papers upon them—Sir Bussy had become the master of a vast quantity of transitory but tangible phenomena which included a great advertising organization, an important part of the retail provision trade, a group of hotels, plantations in the tropics, cinema theatres, and many other things felt rather than known by Mr. Parham. Over these ephemerons Sir Bussy presided during those parts of his days that were withdrawn from social life, and occasionally even when he was existing socially he was summoned to telephones or indulged in inaudible asides to mysterious young men who sprang from nowhere on their account. As a consequence of these activities, always rather obscure to Mr. Parham, Sir Bussy

lived in the midst of a quite terrific comfort and splendour surrounded by an obedience and a dignified obsequiousness that might have overawed a weaker or a vulgarer mind than Mr. Parham's altogether. He appeared in a doorway at night, and marvellous chauffeurs sprang out of the darkness to the salute at his appearance; he said "Gaw," and great butlers were ashamed. In a more luminous world things might have been different, but in this one Sir Bussy's chauffeurs plainly regarded Mr. Parham as a rather unaccountable parcel which Sir Bussy was pleased to send about, and though the household menservants at Buntincombe, Carfex House, Marmion House, and the Hangar treated Mr. Parham as a gentleman, manifestly they did so rather through training than perception. A continual miracle, Sir Bussy was. He had acquired a colossal power of ordering people about, and it was evident to Mr. Parham that he had not the slightest idea what on the whole he wanted them to do. Meanwhile he just ordered them about. It was natural for Mr. Parham to think, "If I had the power he has, what wonderful things I could achieve."

For instance, Sir Bussy might make history.

Mr. Parham was a lifelong student and exponent of history and philosophy. He had produced several studies—mainly round and about Richelieu and going more deeply into the mind of Richelieu than anyone has ever done before—and given short special courses upon historical themes; he had written a small volume of essays; he was

general editor of Fosdyke's popular "Philosophy of History" series, and he would sometimes write reviews upon works of scholarly distinction, reviews that appeared (often shockingly cut and mutilated) in the *Empire*, the *Weekly Philosopher*, and the *Georgian Review*. No one could deal with a new idea struggling to take form and wave it out of existence again more neatly and smilingly than Mr. Parham. And loving history and philosophy as he did, it was a trouble to his mind to feel how completely out of tune was the confusion of current events with anything that one could properly call fine history or fine philosophy. The Great War he realized was History, though very lumpish, brutalized, and unmanageable, and the Conference of Versailles was history also—in further declination. One could still put that Conference as a drama between this power and that, talk of the conflict for "ascendancy," explain the "policy" of this or that man or this or that foreign office subtly and logically.

But from about 1919 onward everything had gone from bad to worse. Persons, events, had been deprived of significance more and more. Discordance, a disarray of values, invaded the flow of occurrence. Take Mr. Lloyd George, for example. How was one to treat a man like that? After a climax of the Versailles type the proper way was to culminate and let the historians get to work, as Woodrow Wilson indeed had done, and as Lincoln or Sulla or Cæsar or Alexander did before him. They culminated and rounded off,

inconvenient facts fell off them bit by bit, and more and more surely could they be treated *historically*. The reality of history broke through superficial appearance; the logic of events was made visible.

But now, where were the powers and what were the forces? In the face of such things as happen to-day, this trained historian felt like a skilled carver who was asked to cut up soup. Where were the bones?—any bones? A man like Sir Bussy ought to be playing a part in a great struggle between the New Rich and the Older Oligarchy; he ought to be an Equestrian pitted against the Patricians. He ought to round off the Close of Electoral Democracy. He ought to embody the New Phase in British affairs—the New Empire. But did he? Did he stand for anything at all? There were times when Mr. Parham felt that if he could not make Sir Bussy stand for something, something definitely, formally and historically significant, his mind would give way altogether.

Surely the ancient and time-honoured processes of history were going on still—surely they were going on. Or what could be going on? Security and predominance—in Europe, in Asia, in finance—were gravely discussed by Mr. Parham and his kindred souls in the more serious weekly and monthly reviews. There were still governments and foreign offices everywhere, and they went through the motions of a struggle for world ascendancy according to the rules, decently and in order. Nothing of the slightest importance occurred now between the Powers that was not

strictly confidential. Espionage had never been so universal, conscientious, and respected, and the double cross of Christian diplomacy ruled the skies from Washington to Tokio. Britain and France, America, Germany, Moscow cultivated navies and armies and carried on high dignified diplomacies and made secret agreements with and against each other just as though there had never been that stupid talk about "a war to end war." Bolshevik Moscow, after an alarming opening phase, had settled down into the best tradition of the Czar's Foreign Office. If Mr. Parham had been privileged to enjoy the intimacy of statesmen like Sir Austen Chamberlain and Mr. Winston Churchill or M. Poincaré, and if he could have dined with some of them, he felt sure that after dinner, with the curtains drawn and the port and the cigars moving with a pensive irregularity like chess pieces upon the reflective mahogany, things would be said, a tone would be established that would bring him back warmly and comfortably again into his complete belief in history as he had learnt it and taught it.

But somehow, in spite of his vivid illuminating books and able and sometimes quite important articles, such social occasions did not come to his assistance.

Failing such reassurances, a strange persuasion in his mind arose and gathered strength, that round and about the present appearances of historical continuity something else quite different and novel and not so much menacing as dematerializing these

appearances was happening. It is hard to define what this something else was. Essentially it was a vast and increasing inattention. It was the way everybody was going on, as if all the serious things in life were no longer serious. And as if other things were. And in the more recent years of Mr. Parham's life it had been, in particular, Sir Bussy.

One night Mr. Parham asked himself a heart-searching question. It was doubtful to him afterwards whether he had had a meditation or a nightmare, whether he had thought or dreamt he thought. Suppose, so it was put to him, that statesmen, diplomatists, princes, professors of economics, military and naval experts, and in fact all the present heirs of history, were to bring about a situation, complex, difficult, dangerous, with notes, counter notes, utterances—and even ultimatums—rising towards a declaration of war about some "question." And suppose—oh, horror!—suppose people in general, and Sir Bussy in particular, just looked at it and said, "Gaw," or "Meantersay?" and turned away. Turned away and went on with the things they were doing, the silly things unfit for history? What would the heirs of history do? Would the soldiers dare to hold a pistol at Sir Bussy, or the statesmen push him aside? Suppose he refused to be pushed aside and resisted in some queer circumventing way of his own. Suppose he were to say, "Cut all this right out—now." And suppose they found they had to cut it out!

Well, what would become then of our historical inheritance? Where would the Empire be, the

Powers, our national traditions and policies? It was an alien idea, this idea that the sawdust was running out of the historical tradition, so alien indeed that it surely never entered Mr. Parham's mind when it was fully awake. There was really nothing to support it there, no group of concepts to which it could attach itself congenially, and yet, once it had secured its footing, it kept worrying at Mr. Parham's serenity like a silly tune that has established itself in one's brain. "They won't obey—when the time comes they won't obey"; that was the refrain. The generals would say, "Haw," but the people would say, "Gaw!" And Gaw would win! In the nightmare, anyhow, Gaw won. Life after that became inconceivable to Mr. Parham. Chaos!

In which somehow, he felt, Sir Bussy might still survive, transfigured, perhaps, but surviving. Horribly. Triumphantly.

Mr. Parham came vividly and certainly awake and lay awake until dawn.

The muse of History might tell of the rise of dynasties, the ascendancy of this power or that, of the onset of nationalism with Macedonia, of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, of the age-long struggles of Islam and Christendom and of Latin and Greek Christianity, of the marvellous careers of Alexander and Cæsar and Napoleon, unfolding the magic scroll of their records, seeking to stir up Sir Bussy to play his part, his important if subservient part in this continuing drama of hers, and Sir Bussy would reflect almost sleepily

over the narrative, would seem to think nothing of the narrative, would follow some train of thought of his own into regions inaccessible to Mr. Parham, and would say, "Gaw."

Gaw!

Mr. Parham was becoming neurasthenic. . . .

And then, to add to his troubles, there was this damned nonsense now about going to a séance and taking mediums seriously, them and their nasty, disreputable, and irritatingly inexplicable phenomena.

About dawn Mr. Parham was thinking very seriously of giving up Sir Bussy. But he had thought of that several times before and always with a similar result. Finally he went to a séance, he went to a series of séances with Sir Bussy, as this narrative will in due course relate.