CHAPTER II

TELLS HOW SIR BUSSY AND MR. PARHAM BECAME ASSOCIATED

WHEN five years or more ago Mr. Parham had met Sir Bussy for the first time, the great financier had seemed to be really interested in the things of the mind, modestly but seriously interested.

Mr. Parham had talked of Michael Angelo and Botticelli at a man's dinner given by Sebright Smith at the Rialto. It was what Mr. Parham called one of Sebright Smith's marvellous feats of mixing and what Sebright Smith, less openly, called a "massacre." Sebright Smith was always promising and incurring the liability for hospitality in a most careless manner, and when he had accumulated a sufficiency of obligations to bother him he gave ruthless dinners and lunches, machine-gun dinners and lunches, to work them off. Hence his secret name for these gatherings. He did not care whom he asked to meet whom, he trusted to champagne as a universal solvent, and Mr. Parham, with that liberal modern and yet cultivated mind of his, found these feasts delightfully catholic.

There is nothing like men who are not at their ease, for listening, and Mr. Parham, who was born well informed, just let himself go. He said

things about Botticelli that a more mercenary man might have made into a little book and got forty or fifty pounds for. Sir Bussy listened with an expression that anyone who did not know him might have considered malignant. But it was merely that when he was interested or when he was occupied with an idea for action he used to let the left-hand corner of his mouth hang down.

When there came a shift with the cigars and Negro singers sang Negro spirituals, Sir Bussy seized an opportunity and slipped into one of the two chairs that had become vacant on either side of Mr. Parham.

"You know about those things?" he asked, regardless of the abounding emotional richness of "Lat my people go-o."

Mr. Parham conveyed interrogation.

"Old masters, Art and all that."

"They interest me," said Mr. Parham, smiling with kindly friendliness, for he did not yet know the name or the power of the man to whom he was talking.

"They might have interested *me*—but I cut it out. D'you ever lunch in the city?"

"Not often."

"Well, if ever you are that way—next week, for example—ring me up at Marmion House."

The name conveyed nothing to Mr. Parham.

"I'll be delighted," he said politely.

Sir Bussy, it seemed, was on his way to depart. He paused for a moment. "For all I know," he said, "there may be a lot in Art. Do come. I was

really interested." He smiled, with a curious gleam of charm, turned off the charm, and departed briskly, in an interlude while Sebright Smith and the singers decided noisily about the next song.

Later Mr. Parham sought his host. "Who is the sturdy little man with a flushed face and wiry hair who went early?"

"Think I know everybody here?" said Sebright Smith.

"But he sat next to you!"

"Oh, *that* chap! That's one of our conq—conquerors, said Sebright Smith, who was drunk.

"Has he a name?"

"Has he not?" said Sebright Smith. "Sir Blasted Bussy Bussy Buy-up-the-Universe Woodcock. He's the sort of man who buys up everything. Shops and houses and factories. Estates and pot houses. Quarries. Whole trades. Buys things on the way to you. Fiddles about with them a bit before you get 'em. You can't eat a pat of butter now in London before he's bought and sold it. Railways he buys, hotels, cinemas and suburbs, men and women, soul and body. Mind he doesn't buy you."

"I'm not on the market."

"Private treaty, I suppose," said Sebright Smith, and realizing from Mr. Parham's startled interrogative face that he had been guilty of some indelicacy, tried to tone it down with, "Have some more champagne?"

Mr. Parham caught the eye of an old friend and

did not answer his host's last remark. Indeed, he hardly saw any point to it, and the man was plainly drunk. He lifted a vertical hand to his friend as one might hail a cab and shouldered his way towards him.

In the course of the next few days Mr. Parham made a number of discreet inquiries about Sir Bussy, he looked him up in *Who's Who*, where he found a very frank and rather self-conscious half column, and decided to accept that invitation to Marmion House in a decisive manner. If the man wanted tutoring in Art he should have tutoring in Art. Wasn't it Lord Rosebery who said, "We must educate our masters"?

They would have a broad-minded, friendly tête-à-tête, Mr. Parham would open the golden world of Art to his host and incidentally introduce a long-cherished dream that it would cost Sir Bussy scarcely anything to make into a fine and delightful reality.

This dream, which was destined to hold Mr. Parham in resentful vassalage to Sir Bussy through long, long years of hope deferred, was the vision of a distinguished and authoritative weekly paper, with double columns and a restrained title heading, of which Mr. Parham would be the editor. It was to be one of those papers, not vulgarly gross in their circulation, but which influence opinion and direct current history throughout the civilized world. It was to be all that the *Spectator*, the *Saturday Review*, the *Nation*, and the *New Statesman* have ever been and more. It was to be largely

the writing of Mr. Parham and of young men influenced and discovered by him. It was to arraign the whole spectacle of life, its public affairs, its "questions," its science, art, and literature. It was to be understanding, advisory, but always a little aloof. It was to be bold at times, stern at times, outspoken at times, but never shouting, never vulgar. As an editor one partakes of the nature of God; you are God with only one drawback, a Proprietor. But also, if you have played your cards well, you are God with a definite Agreement. And without God's responsibility for the defects and errors of the universe you survey. You can smile and barb your wit as He cannot do. For He would be under suspicion of having led up to His own jokes.

Writing "Notes of the Week" is perhaps one of the purest pleasures life offers an intelligent, cultivated man. You encourage or you rebuke nations. You point out how Russia has erred and Germany taken your hint of the week before last. You discuss the motives of statesmen and warn bankers and colossal business adventurers. You judge judges. You have a word of kindly praise or mild contempt for the foolish multitude of writers. You compliment artists, sometimes left-handedly. The little brawling Correspondents play about your feet, writing their squabbling, protesting letters, needing sometimes your reproving pat. Every week you make or mar reputations. Criticizing everyone, you go uncriticized. You speak out of a cloud, glorious, powerful and

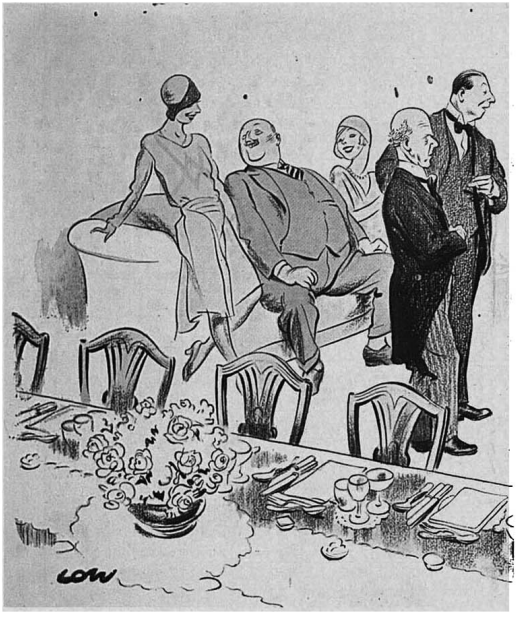
obscure. Few men are worthy of this great trust, but Mr. Parham had long felt himself among that elect minority. With difficulty he had guarded his secret, waiting for his paper as the cloistered virgin of the past waited for her lover. And here at last was Sir Bussy, Sir Bussy who could give this precious apotheosis to Mr. Parham with scarcely an effort.

He had only to say "Go" to the thing. Mr. Parham knew just where to go and just what to do. It was Sir Bussy's great opportunity. He might evoke a God. He had neither the education nor the abilities to be a God, but he could bring a God into being.

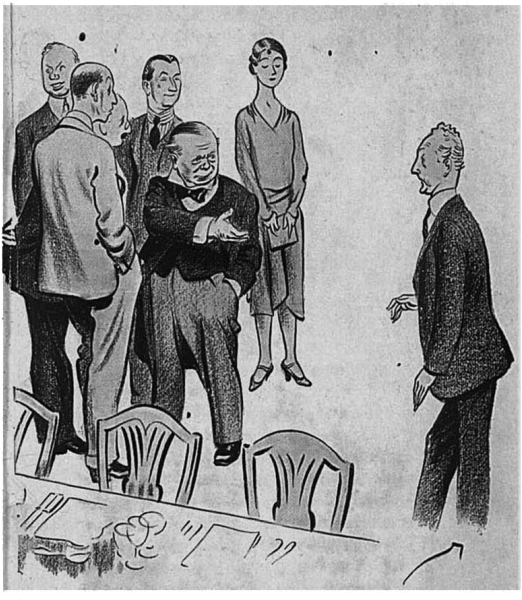
Sir Bussy had bought all sorts of things but apparently he had never yet come into the splash and excitement of newspaper properties. It was time he did. It was time he tasted Power, Influence, and Knowledge brimming fresh from the source. His own source.

With such thoughts already pullulating in his mind Mr. Parham had gone to his first lunch at Marmion House.

Marmion House he found a busy place. It had been built by Sir Bussy. Eight and thirty companies had their offices there, and in the big archway of the Victoria Street entrance Mr. Parham was jostled by a great coming and going of swift-tripping clerks and stenographers seeking their midday refreshment. A populous lift shed passengers at every floor and left Mr. Parham alone with the lift boy for the top.



"It was not to be the pleasant little



tête-à-tête. Mr. Parham had expected."

It was not to be the pleasant little tête-à-tête Mr. Parham had expected when he had telephoned in the morning. He found Sir Bussy in a large dining room with a long table surrounded by quite a number of people who Mr. Parham felt from the very outset were hangers-on and parasites of the worst description. Later he was to realize that a few of them were in a sense reputable and connected with this or that of the eight and thirty companies Sir Bussy had grouped about him, but that was not the first impression. There was a gravely alert stenographer on Sir Bussy's left-hand side whom Mr. Parham considered much too dignified in her manner and much too graceful and well dressed for her position, and there were two very young women with grossly familiar manners who called Sir Bussy "Bussy dear" and stared at Mr. Parham as though he were some kind of foreigner. Later on in the acquaintanceship Mr. Parham was to realize that these girls were Sir Bussy's pet nieces by marriage—he had no children of his own—but at the time Mr. Parham thought the very worst of them. They were painted. There was a very, very convex, buoyant man wearing light tweeds and with an insinuating voice who asked Mr. Parham suddenly whether he didn't think something ought to be done about Westernhanger and then slipped off into an obscure joke with one of the nieces while Mr. Parham was still wondering who or what Westernhanger might be. And there was a small, preoccupied looking man with that sort of cylinder forehead one really ought to

take off before sitting down to lunch, who Mr. Parham learnt was Sir Titus Knowles of Harley Street. There was no serious conversation at lunch but only a throwing about of remarks. A quiet man sitting between Mr. Parham and Sir Bussy asked Mr. Parham whether he did not find the architecture of the city abominable.

"Consider New York," he said.

Mr. Parham weighed it. "New York is different."

The quiet man after a pause for reflection said that was true but still . . .

Sir Bussy had greeted Mr. Parham's arrival with his flash of charm and had told him to "sit down anywhere." Then after a little obscure badinage across the table with one of the pretty painted girls about the possibility of her playing "real tennis" in London, the host subsided into his own thoughts. Once he said, "Gaw!"—about nothing.

The lunch had none of the quiet orderliness of a West-End lunch party. Three or four young men, brisk but not dignified, in white linen jackets did the service. There were steak-and-kidney pudding and roast beef, celery for everyone in the American fashion, and a sideboard with all manner of cold meat, cold fruit tarts, and bottles of drink thereon. On the table were jugs of some sort of cup. Mr. Parham thought it best became a simple scholar and a gentleman to disdain the plutocrat's wines and drink plain beer from a tankard. When the eating was over half the party melted away,

including the graceful secretary whose face Mr. Parham was beginning to find interesting, and the rest moved with Sir Bussy into a large low lounge where there were cigars and cigarettes, coffee and liqueurs.

"We're going to this tennis place with Tremayne," the pretty girls announced together.

"Not Lord Tremayne!" thought Mr. Parham and regarded the abdominal case with a new interest. The fellow had been at C.C.C.

"If he tries to play tennis with clubs and solid balls after the lunch he's eaten, he'll drop dead," said Sir Bussy.

"You don't know my powers of assimilation," said the very convex gentleman.

"Have some brandy, Tremayne, and make a job of it," said Sir Bussy.

"Brandy," said Tremayne to a passing servitor. "A double brandy."

"Get his lordship some old brandy," said Sir Bussy.

So it was really Lord Tremayne! But how inflated! Mr. Parham was already a tutor when Lord Tremayne had come up, a beautifully slender youth. He came up and he was sent down. But in the interval he had been greatly admired.

The three departed, and Sir Bussy came to Mr. Parham.

"Got anything to do this afternoon?" he asked.

Mr. Parham had nothing of a compelling nature.

"Let's go and look at some pictures," said Sir

Bussy. "I want to. D'you mind? You seem to have ideas about them."

"There's so *many* pictures," said Mr. Parham in a rather jolly tone and smiling.

"National Gallery, I mean. And the Tate, perhaps. Academy's still open. Dealers' shows if necessary. We ought to get around as much as we need to in the afternoon. It's a general idea I want. And how it looks to you."

As Sir Bussy's Rolls-Royce went its slick, swift way westward through the afternoon traffic, he made their objective clearer. "I want to *look* at this painting," he said, with his voice going up at the "look." "What's it all *about?* What's it all *for?* How did it get there? What does it all amount to?"

The corner of his mouth went down and he searched his companion's face with an extraordinary mixture of hostility and appeal in his eyes.

Mr. Parham would have liked to have had notice of the question. He gave Sir Bussy his profile.

"What is Art?" questioned Mr. Parham, playing for time. "A big question."

"Not Art—just this painting," corrected Sir Bussy.

"It's Art," said Mr. Parham. "Art in its nature. One and Indivisible."

"Gaw," said Sir Bussy softly and became still more earnestly expectant.

"A sort of *quintessence*, I suppose," Mr. Parham tried. He waved a hand with a gesture that

had earned him the unjust and unpleasant nickname of "Bunch of Fingers" among his undergraduates. For his hands were really very beautifully proportioned. "A kind of getting the concentrated quality of loveliness, of beauty, out of common experience."

"That we certainly got to look for," injected Sir Bussy.

"And fixing it. Making it permanent."

Sir Bussy spoke again after a pause for reflection. He spoke with an air of confiding thoughts long suppressed. "Sure these painters haven't been putting it over us a bit? I thought—the other night—while you were talking . . . just an idea. . . ."

Mr. Parham regarded his host slantingly. "No," he said slowly and judiciously, "I don't think they've been putting it over us." Just the least little stress in the last four words—imperceptible to Sir Bussy.

"Well, that's what we got to see."

A queer beginning for a queer afternoon—an afternoon with a Barbarian. But indisputably, as Sebright Smith had said, "one of our conquerors." He wasn't a Barbarian to be sniffed away. He fought for his barbarism like a bulldog. Mr. Parham had been taken by surprise. He wished more and more that he had had notice of the question that was pressed upon him as the afternoon wore on. Then he could have chosen his pictures and made an orderly course of it. As it was he got to work haphazard, and instead of fighting a set

battle for Art and the wonder and sublimity of it, Mr. Parham found himself in the position of a commander who is called upon with the enemy already in his camp. It was a piecemeal discussion.

Sir Bussy's attitude so far as Mr. Parham could make it out from his fragmentary and illiterate method of expressing himself, was one of sceptical inquiry. The man was uncultivated—indeed, he was glaringly uncultivated—but there was much natural intelligence in his make-up. He had evidently been impressed profoundly by the honour paid to the names of the great Princes of pictorial art by all men of taste and intelligence, and he could not see why they were exalted to such heights. So he wanted it explained to him. He had evidently vast curiosities. To-day it was Michael Angelo and Titian he questioned. To-morrow it might be Beethoven or Shakespeare. He wasn't to be fobbed off by authority. He didn't admit authority. He had to be met as though the acquiescence and approval of generations to these forms of greatness had never been given.

He went up the steps from the entrance to the National Gallery with such a swift assurance that the thought occurred to Mr. Parham that he had already paid a visit there. He made at once for the Italians.

"Now, here's pictures," he said, sweeping on through one room to another and only slowing down in the largest gallery of all. "They're fairly interesting and amoosing. The most part.

A lot of them are bright. They might be brighter, but I suppose none of them are exactly fast colour. You can see the fun the chaps have had painting them. I grant all that. I wouldn't object to having quite a lot of them about in Carfex House. I'd like to swipe about with a brush myself a bit. But when it comes to making out they're something more than that and speaking of them in a sort of hushed religious way as though those chaps knew something special about heaven and just let it out, I don't get you. I don't for the life of me get you."

"But here, for instance," said Mr. Parham, "this Francesca—the sweetness and delicacy—surely *divine* isn't too much for it."

"Sweetness and delicacy! Divine! Well, take a spring day in England, take the little feathers on a pheasant's breast, or bits of a sunset, or the morning light through a tumbler of flowers on a window sill. Surely things of that sort are no end sweeter and more delicate and more divine and all the rest of it than this—this *pickled* stuff."

"Pickled!" For a moment Mr. Parham was overcome.

"Pickled prettiness," said Sir Bussy defiantly. "Pickled loveliness, if you like. . . . And a lot of it not very lovely and not so marvellously well pickled."

Sir Bussy continued hitting Mr. Parham while he was down. "All these Madonnas. Did they *want* to paint them or were they obliged? Who

ever thought a woman sitting up on a throne like that was any catch?"

"Pickled!" Mr. Parham clung to the main theme. "*No!*"

Sir Bussy, abruptly expectant, dropped the corner of his mouth and brought his face sideways towards Mr. Parham.

Mr. Parham waved his hand about and found the word he wanted. "Selected."

He got it still better. "Selected and fixed. These men went about the world seeing—seeing with all their might. Seeing with gifts. Born to see. And they tried—and I think succeeded—in seizing something of their most intense impressions. For us. The Madonna was often—was usually—no more than an excuse. . . ."

Sir Bussy's mouth resumed its more normal condition, and he turned with an appearance of greater respect towards the pictures again. He would give them a chance under that plea. But his scrutiny did not last for long.

"That thing," he said, returning to the object of their original remarks.

"Francesca's Baptism," breathed Mr. Parham.

"To my mind it's not a selection: it's an assembly. Things he liked painting. The background is jolly, but only because it reminds you of things you've seen. I'm not going to lie down in front of it and worship. And most of this——"

He seemed to indicate the entire national collection.

"—is just painting."

"I must contest," said Mr. Parham. "I must contest."

He pleaded the subtle colouring of Filippo Lippi, the elation and grace and classic loveliness of Botticelli; he spoke of richness, anatomical dexterity, virtuosity, and culminated at last in the infinite solemnity of Leonardo's Madonna of the Rocks. "The mystery, the serene mystery of that shadowed woman's face; the sweet wisdom of the Angel's self-content," said Mr. Parham. "Painting! It's Revelation."

"Gaw," said Sir Bussy, head on one side.

He was led from picture to picture like an obstinate child. "I'm not saying the stuff's *bad*," he repeated; "I'm not saying it isn't interesting; but I don't see the call for superlatives. It's being reminded of things, and it's you really that has the things. Taking it altogether," and he surveyed the collection, "I'll admit it's clever, sensitive work, but I'm damned if I see anything divine."

Also he made a curiously ungracious concession to culture. "After a bit," he said, "one certainly gets one's eye in. Like being in the dark in a cinema."

But it would be tedious to record all his crude reactions to loveliness that have become the dearest heritage of our minds. He said Raphael was "dam' genteel." He rebelled at El Greco. "Byzantine solemnity," he repeated after Mr. Parham, "it's more like faces seen in the back of a spoon." But he came near cheering Tintoretto's

Origin of the Milky Way. "Gaw," he said warmly. "Now *that!* It isn't decent but it's damn fine."

He went back to it.

It was in vain that Mr. Parham tried to beguile him past the Rokeby Venus.

"Who did that?" he asked, as if he suspected Mr. Parham.

"Velazquez."

"Well, what's the essential difference between that and a good big photograph of a naked woman tinted and posed to excite you?"

Mr. Parham was a little ashamed to find himself arguing an issue so crude in a public place and audibly, but Sir Bussy was regarding him with that unconscious menace of his which compelled replies.

"The two things aren't in the same world. The photograph is material, factual, personal, individual. Here the beauty, the long delightful lines of a slender human body, are merely the theme of a perfect composition. The body becomes transcendental. It is sublimated. It is robbed of all individual defect and individual coarseness.

"Nonsense! that girl's individualized enough for—anybody."

"I do *not* agree. Profoundly I do *not* agree."

"Gaw! I'm not quarrelling with the picture, only I don't see the force of all this transcending and sublimating. I like it—just as I like that Tintoretto. But a pretty naked young woman is beautiful anywhere and anyhow, especially if you're in

the mood, and I don't see why a poor little smut seller in the street should be run in for selling just exactly what anyone in the world can come here to see--and buy photographs of in the vestibule. It isn't Art I'm objecting to, but the Airs Art gives itself. It's just as if Art had been asked to dinner at Buckingham Palace and didn't want to be seen about with its poor relations. Who got just as much right to live."

Mr. Parham moved on with an expression of face—as if the discussion had decayed unpleasantly.

"I wonder if there is time to get on to the Tate," he considered. "There you'll find the British school and the wild uncharted young." He could not refrain from a delicate, almost imperceptible sneer. "Their pictures are newer. You may find them brighter and more pleasing on that account."

They did go on to the Tate Gallery. But Sir Bussy found no further objections to art there nor any reconciliation. His chief judgment was to ascribe "cheek" to Mr. Augustus John. As he and Mr. Parham left the building he seemed to reflect, and then he delivered himself of what was evidently his matured answer to his self-posed question for that afternoon.

"I don't see that this Painting gets you out to anything. I don't see that it gets you out of anything. It's not discovery and it's not escape. People talk as if it was a door out of this damned world. Well—*is* it?"

"It has given colour and interest to thousands —myriads—of quietly observant lives."

"Cricket can do that," said Sir Bussy.

Mr. Parham had no answer to such a remark. For some brief moments it seemed to him that the afternoon had been a failure. He had done his best, but this was an obdurate mind, difficult to dominate, and he had, he felt, failed completely to put the idea of Art over to it. They stood side by side in silence in the evening glow, waiting for Sir Bussy's chauffeur to realize that they had emerged. This plutocrat, thought Mr. Parham, will never understand me, will never understand the objectives of a true civilization, never endow the paper I need. I must keep polite and smiling as a gentleman should, but I have wasted time and hope on him.

In the car, however, Sir Bussy displayed an unexpected gratitude, and Mr. Parham realized his pessimism had been premature.

"Well," said Sir Bussy, "I got a lot out of this afternoon. It's been a Great Time. You've interested me. I shall remember all sorts of things you've said about this Art. We held on fine. We looked and we looked. I think I got your point of view; I really think I have. That other evening I said, 'I must get that chap's point of view. He's amazing.' I hope this is only the first of quite a lot of times when I'm going to have the pleasure of meeting you and getting your point of view. . . . Like pretty women?"

"Eh?" said Mr. Parham.

"Like pretty women?"

"Man is mortal," said Mr. Parham with the air of a confession.

"I'd love to see you at a supper party I'm giving at the Savoy. Thursday next. Supper and keep on with it. Everything fit to look at on the London stage and most of it showing. Dancing."

"I'm not a dancing man, you know."

"Nor me. But *you* ought to take lessons. You've got the sort of long leg to do it. Anyhow, we might sit in a corner together and you tell me something about Women. Like you've been telling me about Art. I been so busy, but I've always wanted to know. And you can take people down to supper whenever you feel dullish. Any number of them ready to be taken down to supper. Again and again and again and again, as the poem says. We don't stint the supper."