## CHAPTER III

### MR. PARHAM AMONG THE GAYER RICH

It was not clear to Mr. Parham that he would get his newspaper, but it was quite clear that he had a reasonable prospect of becoming a sort of Mentor to Sir Bussy. Just what sort of Mentor it was still too early to guess. If you will imagine Socrates as tall and formally good-looking and Alcibiades as short and energetic, and if you will suppose that unfortunate expedition to Syracuse replaced under sound advice by a masterful consolidation of Greece; if indeed you will flatten that parallel to the verge of extinction without actually obliterating it, you will get something of the flavour of Mr. Parham's anticipations. Or perhaps Aristotle and Alexander will better serve our purpose. It is one of the endless advantages of a sound classical education that you need never see, you can never see, a human relationship in its vulgar simplicity; there is always the enrichment of these regurgitated factors. You lose all sense of current events; you simply get such history as you have swallowed repeating itself.

In this party at the Savoy Mr. Parham saw Sir Bussy seriously engaged in expenditure for the first time. A common mind would have been mightily impressed by the evident height, width,

depth, and velocity of the flow, and even Mr. Parham found himself doing little sums and estimates to get an idea of what this one evening must be costing his new acquaintance. It would, Mr. Parham reckoned, have maintained a weekly of the very highest class for three years or more.

Mr. Parham made it his rule to dress correctly and well for every social occasion. He did not believe in that benefit of clergy which is used as an excuse by men of learning and intellectual distinction for low collars on high occasions and antiquated smoking jackets at dances. He thought it better to let people understand that on occasion a philosopher is fully equal to being a man of the world. His tallness permitted a drooping urbanity, a little suggestive of Lord Balfour, and on the whole he knew himself with his fine and fastidious features to be anything but ill-looking. His Gibus hat, a trifle old-fashioned in these slovenly times, kept his bunch of fingers within bounds, and his fine gold chain was plainly ancestral.

The entire Savoy had placed itself at the disposal of Sir Bussy. Its servants were his servants. In their grey plush breeches and yellow waistcoats they looked like inherited family servitors. In the cloakroom he found Sir Titus Knowles of the stupendous brow divesting himself of an extremely small black hat and a huge cloak.

"Hullo!" said Sir Titus. "*You* here!"

"Apparently," said Mr. Parham taking it in good part.

"Ah," said Sir Titus.

"No need for a ticket, Sir Titus," said the receiver of cloaks. "Too well known, sir."

Sir Titus disappeared, smiling faintly.

But Mr. Parham received a ticket for his overcoat.

He drifted past the men waiting for their womankind towards a dazzling crowd of lovely and extremely expensive-looking ladies with shining arms and shoulders and backs and a considerable variety of men. There was talk like a great and greatly fluctuating wind blowing through tin-leaved trees. A sort of reception was in progress. Sir Bussy appeared abruptly.

"Good," he said with gusto. "We must have a talk. You know Pomander Poole? She's dying to meet you."

He vanished, and that evening Mr. Parham never had an opportunity to exchange more than two or three missile sentences with him, though he had endless glimpses of him at a distance, moodily active or artificially gay.

Miss Pomander Poole began very seriously by asking Mr. Parham his name, which Sir Bussy, through inadvertency or a momentary forgetfulness, had never mentioned. "Parham is the name of the man you are dying to meet," said Mr. Parham, and did a dazzling smile with all his excellent teeth, except, of course, the molars at the back.

"Bussy's more like a flea than ever to-night," said Miss Pomander Poole. "He ought to be called the Quest. Or the little wee Grail. I've

seen six people trying to catch him."

She was a dark, handsome lady with tormented-looking eyes and more breadth than is fashionable. Her voice was rich and fine. She surveyed the long room before them. "Why in heaven he gives these parties I can't imagine," she said, and sighed and became still, to show she had finished her part in the conversation.

Mr. Parham hung fire. The name of Pomander Poole was very familiar to him, but for the life of him at that moment he could not connect it with books, articles, plays, pictures, scandals, society gossip, or the music-hall stage with any of the precision necessary if he was to talk in the easy, helpful, rather amused way becoming to a philosopher in his man-of-the-world mood. So he had to resort to what was almost questioning.

"I've known our host only very recently," said Mr. Parham, plainly inviting comment.

"He doesn't exist," she said.

Apparently we were going to be brilliant, and if so Mr. Parham was not the man to miss his cues. "We've met a sort of simulacrum," he protested.

She disregarded Mr. Parham's words altogether. "He doesn't exist," she sighed. "So not only can no one else catch him, he can't catch himself. He's always turning back the bedclothes and having a good look for himself, but it's never any good."

The lady certainly had breadth.

"He acquires wealth," said Mr. Parham.

"Nature abhors a vacuum," she said with the weariness of one who answers a familiar catechism. She was looking about her with her sombre, appealing eyes as she spoke, as if she were looking for someone to relieve her of Mr. Parham.

"To-night the vacuum is full of interesting people."

"I don't know a tithe of them."

"I'm sufficiently unworldly to find their appearances interesting."

"I'm sufficiently worldly to build no hopes on that."

A second phase of awkwardness hung between Mr. Parham and his companion. He wished she could be just wiped out of existence and somebody easier put in her place. But she it was who saved the situation. "I suppose it's too early to begin going down to supper," she said; "down or up or wherever it is. These vacuum parties provoke feelings of extraordinary emptiness in me.

"Well, let's explore," said Mr. Parham, doing his smile again and taking the lady in tow.

"I'm sure I've heard you lecture at the Royal Institution," she opened.

"Never been there," said Mr. Parham.

"I've seen you there. Usually two or three of you. You're a man of science."

"Classical, dear lady. Academic. With a few old and tested ideas like favourite pipes that I brood over again and again—and an inky fore-finger."

Now that wasn't so bad. Miss Poole looked at

him as though she had just observed his existence for the first time. A ray of interest shone and then dissolved into other preoccupations.

When we say that Mr. Parham took the lady in tow and found the supper room we defer rather to the way in which he would have liked to have put it. But in fact, as they made their way through the brilliant multitude, she was usually leading in a distraught yet purposive manner by anything between two yards and six. Supper had indeed begun noisily and vigorously, and Miss Poole, still leading, was hailed by a group of people who seemed to be not so much supping as laying in provisions. "What are you saying tonight, Pomander?" cried a handsome young man, and she melted into the centre of the group without any attempt to introduce Mr. Parham. "I'm doubting Bussy's real existence," answered Miss Poole, "and craving for his food."

"Like a modern Christian and his God," said someone.

Mr. Parham travelled round the outskirts of the group and came to the glittering tablecloth. The board was bountiful, and the only drink, it seemed to Mr. Parham, was champagne, poured from glass jugs. He tried to get a drink for Miss Poole, but she was already supplied, so he drank himself, pretended to participate in the conversation of the backs that were turned towards him, looked amused, and ate a couple of chicken sandwiches with an air of careless ease. Miss Poole had brightened considerably. She smacked a large

ham-faced Jew on the cheek with a *pâté de foie gras* sandwich—for no apparent reason. Perhaps she liked him. Or perhaps it was just playfulness. She led up to and repeated her picture of Sir Bussy looking for himself in the bedclothes, and it was hailed with wild delight. Amidst the applause a small blond youth turned round with every appearance of extreme caution, repeated the delightful invention carefully to Mr. Parham, and then forgot him again instantly.

Mr. Parham tried not to feel that the group had —as Mr. Aldous Huxley, in that physiological manner of his, might say—excreted him, but that was very much his feeling, and he was bearing up against it with a second glass of champagne when he discovered Sir Titus Knowles close beside him and evidently also undergoing elimination from an adjacent group of bright young things, "Hullo," he said. "*You* here?"

"Rather fun," said Sir Titus insincerely, and then out of nowhere came the most ravishing of youthful blondes, all warmth and loveliness, pretending to be out of breath and addressing herself particularly to the great consultant.

"Gentleman of the name of Parham, Sir Titus," she said in a warm husky voice. "Meanwhile something to eat, please."

Her immediate need was supplied. "When I asked Bussy what's he like, he said, 'Oh, you'll know him when you see him.' I got to find him, take him, and make him dance. He bet me. Parham. Shall I go round singing it? I suppose

there's about a million people here. I'll be thrown out for accosting."

She glanced at Sir Titus, detected a directive grimace, became alert to the situation, and faced Mr. Parham. "Of course!" she said with her mouth full. "Right in one. My name's Gaby Greuze. You're the handsomest man here. I might have known Bussy wouldn't put me off with anything cheap."

Mr. Parham's expression mingled delight and candid disavowal. "You'll never make me dance," he said.

The accidental pressures of the crowd about them brought her extremely close to him. What a lovely face it was, seen so nearly! Impudent, blue eyed! The modelling of the eyelids was exquisite. The little soft corner of the drooping mouth! "I'll make you dance. I c'd make you do no end of things. Cause why?"

She took a healthy mouthful of ham and munched.

"I like you."

She nodded confirmation. Mr. Parham's brilliant smile came unbidden. "I'm not going to resist for a moment, I can assure you," he said and added with the air of a redoubtable character, "Trust me." Like her! He could have eaten her. Yes, this was something better than the apparently premeditated brilliance of Miss Pomander Poole. He forgot that disconcerting person ostentatiously there and then. She might hit them all with sandwiches and dig everybody in the ribs with

chocolate éclairs for all he cared.

Miss Gaby Greuze addressed herself to her task with deliberation and intelligence. There is nothing so private and intimate in the world as a duologue in a crowd engaged in eating and talking. The sounds of Sir Bussy's party have already been compared to a wind in a forest of metallic leaves. Plates, knives, and dishes were added now to the orchestra. These woven sounds, this metallic tissue in the air seemed to make an arbour, a hiding place for Mr. Parham and his lovely companion. From this secret bower he had but to thrust an arm and get more champagne, salads of diverse sorts in little dishes, everything nice in aspic and fruits in their season and out of it. Then he held out his winnings to her and she smiled her thanks at him with those incredibly lovely eyes and partook. Afterwards they went off with arms entwined, roguishly seeking a "quiet corner" where she could teach him his elements before he made his début on the dancing floor. They got on together wonderfully. His fine classical face bending down to say airy nothings was caressed by the natural silk of her hair.

There was something in this experience that reminded Mr. Parham of Horace and the naughtier side of the Latin poets, and anything that reminded him of Horace and the naughtier side of the Latin poets could not, he felt, be altogether vulgar or bad. And there was a moment or so when nothing but his classical training, his high literary and

university standing, his sense of the extraordinary number of unexpected corners, casual mirrors, and observant attendants in the Savoy, and also, we must add, something stern and purposeful in himself, restrained him from seizing this most provocative young woman and showing her what a man of learning and spirit could do in the way of passionate pressure with his lips. He was flushed now and none the worse looking for that.

"Don't forget what I've told you," said Miss Gaby Greuze, guiding him back towards the more frequented regions of the party; "keep your head —best keep it in your heels—and the next dance is ours. Let's go and sit and look at them, and I'll have a lemonade."

Mr. Parham smiled to think what some of his undergraduates would make of it if they could see him now. He sat by his partner with his hand just a little familiarly on the back of her chair and talked like an intimate.

"I find Sir Bussy a marvel," he said, blinking at the throng.

"He's a very Teasing Marvel," she said. "One of these days he'll get his little face smacked."

"I hope not."

"It won't get that damned grin of his off. He ought to find something better in life than pulling people's legs—all the money he's got."

"I've only just been drawn into the vortex,"

But something missed fire in that remark, because she said, "It's one of the selectest clubs

in London, I believe," and seemed to respect him more.

"And *now*," she said, standing up, and prepared to carry Mr. Parham into the dance so soon as sufficient couples had accumulated to veil the naked bareness of the floor. She had strong arms, Mr. Parham realized with amazement, a strong will, and her instructions had been explicit. Mr. Parham had got as near as he was ever likely to get to modern dancing. "Bussy's over there," she said and cut a corner towards their host.

He was standing quite alone near the gesticulating black and brown band, concentrated, it would seem, upon their elusive transitions. His hands were deep in his pockets and his head swayed dreamily. Mr. Parham and his partner circled smiling about him twice before he became aware of them.

"Gaw!" said Sir Bussy, looking up at last. "It hasn't taken you an hour!"

"This *him*?" she demanded triumphantly.

"That's him?" said Sir Bussy.

"You've lost."

"No. It's you have won. I'm quite content. I congratulate you on your dancing, Parham. I knew you'd make a dancer directly I saw you. Given a proper dancing mistress. Life's full of lessons for all of us. How d'you like her? Puts old Velazquez in his place. A young mistress is better than an old master, eh?"

"After that insult I'll go and eat you out of

house and home," Miss Greuze retorted, missing the point of a remark for the second time that night, and she made Mr. Parham take her down to supper again without completing the dance. He would have liked to go on dancing with her forever, but apparently the dance had served her purpose.

She became curiously angry. "Bussy never leaves you with the feel of winning," she said, "even when you've won. I'll do him down one of these days—if I have to bust everything to do it. He puts ideas into one's head."

"What ideas?" asked Mr. Parham.

"I wonder if I told you . . . she speculated with a strange sudden expression in her eyes, and she seemed to measure Mr. Parham.

"You can tell me anything," said he.

"Sometimes telling means a lot. No—not just yet, anyhow. Very likely never."

"I can hope," said Mr. Parham, feeling that might mean anything or nothing.

At supper Mr. Parham lost her. He lost her while he was thinking over this queer little passage. He was not to learn what this idea of hers was for quite a long time. A sudden tide of young things like herself but not so perfectly beautiful, poured round and over her and submerged and took possession of her, caressing her most intimately and calling her pet names: Gaby Sweet! Gaby Perfect! Gaby Darling! some sort of professional sisterhood of dancers or young actresses. He drifted off and was almost entangled again

with Miss Pomander Poole, before he realized his danger.

For a time he was lonely, seeking but failing to restore contact with his all too popular Gaby. By some fatality during this period he seemed always to be drifting towards Pomander Poole, and an equal fatality drove her towards him. An unconscious dramatic urge in her, a mechanical trick of thinking in gestures, made it all too plain to him how little she wanted to resume their conversation. It looked as if she talked to herself also, but happily he was never quite close enough to hear. Then Lord Tremayne turned up, bright and hearty, with "You never told me what you thought about Westernhanger."

Mr. Parham's momentary tension was relieved when the young man added, "It's too late now, so don't let's bother about it. I call it a Disgrace.... I doubt if you know many people in this shallow, glittering world. Eh? Ask me for anyone you fancy. I know the blessed lot."

He then proceeded to introduce Mr. Parham to two countesses and his sister-in-law, Lady Judy Percival, who happened to be handy, and so departed upon some quest of his own. The introductions, as people say of vaccinations, didn't "take" very well, the three ladies fell into a talk among themselves, and Mr. Parham had a quiet, thoughtful time for a while, surveying the multitude. The elation of his success with Gabrielle Greuze had a little abated. Later on perhaps he would be able to detach her again and resume

their talk. He noted Sir Titus in the distance wearing his forehead, he thought, just a trifle too much over one eye and with his arm manifestly about the waist of a slender, dark lady in green. It helped to remind Mr. Parham of his own dignity. He leant against a wall and became observantly still.

Strange to reflect that physically this night party given by a London plutocrat in a smart hotel was probably ten times as luminous, multitudinous, healthy, and lovely as any court pageant of Elizabethan or Jacobean days. Twenty times. How small and dusky such an occasion would seem if it could be trailed across this evening's stirring spectacle! Brocades and wired dresses, none of them too fresh and clean, lit by candles and torches. Astounding, the material exuberance of our times. Yet that dim little assembly had its Shakespeare, its Bacon, its Burleigh, and its Essex. It had become history through and through. It was an everlasting fount of book writing, "studies," comments, allusions. The lightest caresses of the Virgin Queen were matters now for the gravest of scholars. Narrow rooms, perhaps, but spacious times.

But all this present thrust and gaiety—where did it lead? Could it ever become history in any sense of the word? In the court of Queen Elizabeth they moulded the beginnings of America, they laid the foundations of modern science, they forged the English language which these people here with their slang and curt knowingness of

phrase were rapidly turning to dust. A few artists there might be here, a stripling maker of modern comedies. Mr. Parham would grant something for the people who might be unknown to him, and still the balance against this parade was terrible.

The jazz music came out of the background and began to pound and massage his nerves. It beat about the gathering monstrously, as though it were looking for him, and then it would seem to discover him and come and rock him. It smote suddenly into his heart with jungle cries of infinite melancholy and then took refuge in dithering trivialities and a pretence of never having been anything but trivial. It became intimate; it became suggestively obscene. Drums and bone clappers and buzzers. He realized how necessary it was to keep on dancing or talking here, talking fast and loud, to sustain one's self against that black cluster of musicians. How alien they were, almost of another species, with their shining exultant faces, their urgent gestures! What would the Virgin Queen, what would her dear and most faithful Burleigh have made of that bronze-faced conductor?

Queer to think it was she who had, so to speak, sown the seed of that Virginia from which in all probability he came. He seemed now to be hounding on these whites to some mysterious self-effacement and self-destruction. They moved like marionettes to his exertions. . . .

Such exercises of an observant, thoughtful, well-

stored mind were interrupted by the reappearance of Lord Tremayne, encumbered with one of the countesses he had already once introduced to Mr. Parham.

"Here's the very man," he cried joyously. "You know my cousin Lady Glassglade! If anyone can tell you all about Westernhanger, *he* can. He talked about it *marvellously* the other day. Marvellously!"

Mr. Parham was left with Lady Glassglade.

The Glassglades had a place in Worcestershire and were decidedly people to know. Though what the lady could be doing here was perplexing. Sir Bussy's social range was astonishing. She was a little smiling lady with slightly bleached hair and infinite self-possession. Mr. Parham bowed gracefully. "We are too near the band for talking," he said. "Would you care to go down to the supper room?"

"There was such a crowd. I couldn't get anything," said the lady.

Mr. Parham intimated that all that could be changed.

"And I came on here because I was hungry!"

Charming! They got on very well together, and he saw that she had all she needed. He was quietly firm about it. They talked of the place in Worcestershire and of the peculiar *English* charm of Oxfordshire, and then they talked of their host. Lady Glassglade thought Sir Bussy was "simply wonderful." His judgments in business, she was told, were instinctive, so swift he was able

to seize on things while other men were just going about and asking questions. He must be worth eight or ten millions.

"And yet he strikes me as a *lonely* figure," said Mr. Parham. "Lonely and detached."

Lady Glassglade agreed that he was detached.

"We haven't assimilated him," said Mr. Parham, using his face to express a finely constituted social system suffering from indigestion.

"We have not," said Lady Glassglade.

"I've met him quite recently," said Mr. Parham. "He seems strangely typical of the times. All this new wealth, so sure, so bold and so incomparably lacking in *noblesse oblige*."

"It *is* rather like that," said Lady Glassglade.

They both replenished their glasses with more of Sir Bussy's champagne.

"When one considers the sense of obligation our old territorial families displayed. . . ."

"Exactly," said Lady Glassglade sadly.

And then recovering her spirits, "All the same, he's rather fun."

Mr. Parham looked wider and further. He glanced down the corridors of history and faced the dark menace of the future. "I wonder," he said.

It was quite a time before he and Lady Glassglade got disassociated. Mr. Parham was wistfully humorous about a project of Oxford offering "post graduate courses" for the *nouveau riche*. Lady Glassglade seemed to be greatly amused by the idea.

"With tennis, table manners, grouse shooting and professional golf."

Lady Glassglade laughed that well-known merry laugh of hers. Mr. Parham was encouraged to elaborate the idea. He invented a Ritz College and a Claridge's College and a Majestic all competing against each other. Loud speakers from the lecture rooms by each bedside.

As the night drew on Mr. Parham's memories of Sir Bussy's party lost the sharp distinctness of his earlier impressions. In some way he must have lost Lady Glassglade, because when he was talking of the duty under which even a nominal aristocracy lay to provide leadership for the masses, he looked round to see if she appreciated his point, and she had evidently been gone some time. A sort of golden gloom, a massive and yet humorous solemnity, had slowly but surely replaced the rhythmic glittering of his earlier mental state. He talked to strange people about their host. "He is," said Mr. Parham, "a lonely and leaderless soul. Why? Because he has no tradition."

He remembered standing quite quite still for a very long time, admiring and pitying a very beautiful tall and slender woman with a quiet face, who was alone and who seemed to be watching for someone who did not come. He was moved to go up to her and say very softly and clearly to her, "Why so pensive?"

Then, as startled and surprised she turned those lovely violet eyes to him, he would overwhelm

her with a torrent of brilliant conversation. He would weave fact and fancy together. He would compare Sir Bussy to Trimalchio. He would give a brief but vivid account of the work of Petronius. He would go on to relate all sorts of curious impish facts about Queen Elizabeth and Cleopatra and people like that, and she would be fascinated.

"Tell me," he said to a young man with an eye-glass who had drifted near him, and repeated, "Tell me."

He found something queer and interesting had happened to his fingers as he gesticulated, and for a time this held his attention to the exclusion of other matters.

The young man's expression changed from impatience to interest and sympathy. "Tell you *what*?" he asked, getting first Mr. Parham's almost autonomous hand and then Mr. Parham himself well into the focus of the eye-glass.

"Who is that perfect lovely lady in black and —I think they are called sequins, over there?"

"That, sir, is the Duchess of Hichester."

"Your servant," said Mr. Parham.

His mood had changed. He was weary of this foolish, noisy, shallow, nocturnal, glittering great party. Monstrous party. Party outside history, beginning nowhere, going nowhere. All mixed up. Duchesses and dancers. Professors, plutocrats, and parasites. He wanted to go. Only one thing delayed him for a time; he had completely lost his Gibus hat. He patted his pockets;

he surveyed the circumjacent floor. It had gone.

Queer!

Far off he saw a man carrying a Gibus hat, an unmistakable Gibus. Should he whip it out of his hand with a stern "Excuse me?"

But how was Mr. Parham to prove it was his Gibus hat?