

CHAPTER III

METAPSYCHICS IN BUGGINS STREET

FOR a month or so Mr. Parham opposed and evaded Sir Bussy's pressure towards psychic research. It wasn't at all the sort of thing to do, nowadays. It had been vulgarized. Their names were certain to be used freely in the most undignified connections. And at the bottom of his heart Mr. Parham did not believe that there was the shadow of an unknown reality in these obscure performances.

But never had he had such occasion to appreciate the force and tenacity of Sir Bussy's will. He would lie awake at nights wondering why his own will was so inadequate in its resistance. Was it possible, he questioned, that a fine education and all the richness and subtlety that only the classics, classical philosophy, and period history can impart, were incompatible with a really vigorous practical thrust. Oxford educated for quality, but did it educate for power?

Yet he had always assumed he was preparing his Young Men for positions of influence and power. It was a disagreeable novelty for him to ask if anything was wrong with his own will, and if so, what it was that was wrong. And it seemed

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to him that if only he had believed in the efficacy of prayer, he would have prayed first and foremost for some tremendous affluence of will that would have borne away Sir Bussy's obstinacy like a bubble in a torrent. So that it would not be necessary to evade and oppose it afresh day after day. And at last, as he perceived he must, yield to it.

All the private heart searchings of this period of resistance and delay were shot with the reiteration of what had been through all the six years of intercourse an unsettled perplexity. What was Sir Bussy doing this for? Did he really want to know that there was some sort of chink or retractile veil that led out of this sane world of ours into worlds of that unknown wonder, and through which that unknown wonder might presently break into our common day? Did he hope for his "way out of it" here? Or was he simply doing this—as he seemed to have done so many other queer things—to vex, puzzle, and provoke queer reactions in Mr. Parham, Sir Titus, and various other intimates? Or was there a confusion in that untrained intelligence between both sets of motives?

Whatever his intentions, Sir Bussy got his way. One October evening after an exceptionally pass-overish dinner at Marmion House, Mr. Parham found himself with Sir Titus, Hereward Jackson, and Sir Bussy in Sir Bussy's vast smooth car, in search of 97 Buggins Street, in the darker parts of the borough of Wandsworth, Mr. Hereward

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Jackson assisting the chauffeur spasmodically, unhelpfully, and dangerously at the obscurer corners. The peculiar gifts of a certain Mr. Carnac Williams were to be studied and considered.

The medium had been recommended by the best authorities, and Hereward Jackson had already visited this place before. Their hostess was to be old Mrs. Mountain, a steadfast pillar in the spiritualist movement in dark days and prosperous days alike, and this first essay would, it was hoped, display some typical phenomena, voices, messages, perhaps a materialization, nothing very wonderful, but a good beginner's show.

Ninety-seven Buggins Street was located at last, a dimly lit double-fronted house with steps up to a door with a fanlight.

Old Mrs. Mountain appeared in the passage behind the small distraught domestic who had admitted her guests. She was a comfortable, shapeless old lady in black, with a mid-Victorian lace cap, lace ruffles, and a lace apron. She was disposed to be nervously affable and charming. She welcomed Hereward Jackson with a copious friendliness. "And here's your friends," she said. "Mr. Smith, shall we say? And Mr. Jones and Mr. Brown. Naming no names. Welcome all! Last night he was *wonderful*."

Hereward Jackson explained over his shoulder: "Best to be pseudonymous," he said.

She ushered them into a room of her own period, with a cottage piano topped with a woollen mat on which were a pot of some fine-leaved fern

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and a pile of music, a mantel adorned with a large mirror and many ornaments, a central table with a red cloth and some books, a gas pendant, hanging bookshelves, large gilt-framed oleograph landscapes, a small sofa, a brightly burning fire, and a general air of comfort. Cushions, small mats, and antimacassars abounded, and there was an assemblage of stuffed linnets and canaries under a glass shade. It was a room to eat muffins in. Four people, rather drawn together about the fire and with something defensive in their grouping, stood awaiting the new inquirers. An overgrown-looking young man of forty with a large upturned white face and an expression of strained indifference was "my son Mr. Mountain." A little blonde woman was "Miss—something or other"; a tall woman in mourning with thin cheeks, burning eyes, and a high colour was "a friend who joins us," and the fourth was Mr. Carnac Williams, the medium for the evening.

"Mr. Smith, Mr. Jones, Mr. Brown," said Mrs. Mountain, "and this gentleman you know."

The little blonde woman glowed the friendliness of a previous encounter at Hereward Jackson, and Mr. Mountain hesitated and held out a flabby hand to shake Sir Bussy's.

Mr. Parham's first reaction to the medium was dislike. The man was obviously poor, and the dark, narrow eyes in his white face were quick and evasive. He carried his hands bent at the wrist as if he reserved the palms, and his manner was a trifle too deferential to Sir Bussy for that com-

plete lack of information about the visitors attributed to the home team.

"I can't answer for anything," said Mr. Williams in flat, loud tones. "I'm merely a tool."

"A wonderful tool last night," said Mrs. Mountain.

"I knew nothing," said Mr. Williams.

"It was very wonderful to *me*," said the tall woman in a soft musical voice—and seemed restrained by emotion from saying more.

There was a moment's silence.

"Our normal procedure," said Mr. Mountain, betraying a slight lisp in his speech, "is to go upstairs. The room on the first floor is prepared—oh! you'll be able to satisfy yourselves it's not been prepared in any wrong sense. Recently we have been so fortunate as to get actual materializations—a visitant. Our atmosphere has been favourable. . . . If nothing happens to change it. . . . But shall we go upstairs?"

The room upstairs seemed very bare in comparison with the crowded cosiness of the room below. It had been cleared of bric-à-brac. There was a large table surrounded by chairs. One of them was an armchair, destined for Mrs. Mountain, and by it stood a small occasional table bearing a gramophone; the rest were those chairs with bun-like seats so characteristic of the Early Maple period. A third table carried some loose flowers, a tambourine, and a large slate, which was presently discovered to be painted with phosphorescent paint. One corner had been curtained off.

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"That's the cabinet," said Mrs. Mountain.
"You're quite welcome to search it."

On a small table inside it there were ropes, a candle, sealing wax, and other material.

"We aren't for searching to-night," said Sir Bussy. "We're just beginners and ready to take your word for almost anything. We want to get your point of view and all that. It's afterwards we'll make trouble."

"A very fair and reasonable way of approaching the spirits," said Williams. "I feel we'll have a good atmosphere."

Mr. Parham looked cynically impartial.

"If we're not to apply any tests . . ." began Sir Titus, with a note of protest.

"We'll just watch this time," said Sir Bussy. "I'll let you have some tests all right later."

"We don't mind tests," said Williams. "There's a lot about this business I'd like to have tested up to the hilt. For I understand it no more than you do. I'm just a vehicle."

"Yaa," said Sir Titus.

Mr. Mountain proceeded with his explanations. They had been working with a few friends at spirit appearances. Their recent custom had been to get the most sceptical person present to tie up Williams in his chair as hard and firmly as possible. Then hands were joined in the normal way. Then, in complete darkness, except for the faint glimmer of phosphorescence from the slate, they waited. Mrs. Mountain would keep the gramophone going and had a small weak flash-

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light for the purpose. The person next her could check her movements. The thread of music was very conducive to phenomena, they found. They need not wait in silence, for that sometimes produced a bad atmosphere. They might make light but not frivolous conversation or simple comments until things began to happen.

"There's nothing mysterious or magical about it" said Mr. Mountain.

"You'll do the tying up," said Hereward Jackson to Sir Titus.

"I know a knot or two," said Sir Titus ominously. "Do we strip him first?"

"Oo!" said Mr. Mountain reproachfully and indicated the ladies. The question of stripping or anything but a superficial searching was dropped.

Mr. Parham stood in unaffected boredom studying the rather fine lines of the lady in mourning while these preliminaries were settled. She was, he thought, a very sympathetic type. The other woman was a trifle blowsy and much too prepossessed by the medium and Hereward Jackson. The rest of these odd people he disliked, though he bore himself with a courtly graciousness towards old Mrs. Mountain. What intolerable folly it all was!

After eternities of petty fussing the medium was tied up, the knots sealed, and the circle formed. Mr. Parham had placed himself next to the lady in black, and on the other side he fell into contact with the flabby Mountain. Sir Bussy,

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by a sort of natural precedence, had got between the medium and the old lady. Sir Titus, harshly vigilant, had secured the medium's left. The lights were turned out. For several dreary centuries nothing happened except a dribble of weak conversation and an uneasy rustling from the medium. Once he moaned. "*He's going off!*" said Mrs. Mountain. The finger of the lady in mourning twitched, and Mr. Parham was stirred to answering twitches, but it amounted to nothing, and Mr. Parham's interest died away.

Sir Bussy began a conversation with Hereward Jackson about the prospects of Wildcat for the Derby.

"*Darling Mummy,*" came in a faint falsetto from outside the circle.

"What was that?" barked Sir Titus sharply.

"Ssh!" from Sir Bussy.

The lady beside Mr. Parham stirred slightly, and the pressure of her hand beside his intensified. She made a noise as though she wanted to speak, but nothing came but a sob.

"My *dear* lady!" said Mr. Parham softly, deeply moved.

"Just a fla, Mummy. I can't stop to-night. The's others want to come."

Something flopped lightly and softly on the table; it proved afterwards to be a chrysanthemum. There was a general silence, and Mr. Parham realized that the lady beside him was weeping noiselessly. "Milly—sweetheart," she whispered. "Good-night, dear. Good-night."

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Mr. Parham hadn't reckoned on this sort of thing. It made his attention wander. His fine nature responded too readily to human feeling. He hardly noticed at first a queer sound that grew louder, a slobbering and slopping sound that was difficult to locate.

"That's the ectoplasm," said old Mrs. Mountain, "working."

Mr. Parham brought his mind, which had been concentrated on conveying the very deepest sympathy of a strong silent man through his little finger, back to the more general issues of the séance.

Mrs. Mountain started the gramophone for the fourth or fifth repetition of that French horn solo when Tristan is waiting for Isolde. One saw a dim circle of light and her hand moving the needle. Then the light went out with a click and Wagner resumed.

Mr. Mountain was talking to the spinster lady about the best way to get back to Battersea.

"Sssh!" said Sir Titus, as if blowing off steam.

Things were happening. "*Damn!*" said Sir Titus.

"Steady!" said Sir Bussy. "Don't break the circle."

"I was struck by a tin box," said Sir Titus, "or something as hard!"

"No need to move," said Sir Bussy unkindly.

"Struck on the back of the head," said Sir Titus.

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"It may have been the tambourine," said Mr. Mountain.

"Flas!" said the medium's voice, and something soft, cold and moist struck Mr. Parham in the face and fell in his hand.

"Keep the circle please," said old Mrs. Mountain.

Certainly this was exciting in a queer, tedious, unpleasant sort of way. After each event there was a wide expectant interval.

"Our friend is coming," said the medium's voice. "Our dear visitant."

The tambourine with a faint jingle floated over the table far out of reach. It drifted towards Sir Titus. "If you touch me again!" threatened Sir Titus, and the tambourine thought better of it and, it would seem, made its way back to the other table.

A light hand rested for a moment on Mr. Parham's shoulder. Was it a woman's hand? He turned quietly and was startled to find something with a faint bluish luminosity beside him. It was the phosphorescent slate.

"Look!" said Hereward Jackson.

Sir Titus grunted.

A figure was gliding noiselessly and evenly outside the circle. It held the luminous slate and raised and lowered this against its side to show a robed woman's figure with a sort of nun's coif. "She's come," sighed Mrs. Mountain very softly.

It seemed a long time before this visitant spoke.

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"Lee-tle children," said a womanly falsetto. "Leetle children."

"Who's the lady?" asked Sir Bussy.

The figure became invisible.

After a little pause the medium answered from his place. "St. Catherine."

The name touched a fount of erudition in Mr. Parham, "*Which* St. Catherine?"

"Just St. Catherine."

"But there were *two* St. Catherines—or more," said Mr. Parham. "Two who had mystical marriages with the Lord. St. Catherine of Alexandria, whose symbol is the wheel—the patroness of spinsters generally and the Catherinettes of Paris in particular—and St. Catherine of Siena. There's a picture by Memling—perfectly lovely thing. And, yes—there *was* a third one, a Norwegian St. Catherine, if I remember rightly. And possibly others. Couldn't she tell us? I would so like to know."

A silence followed this outbreak.

"She's never told us anything of that," said Mrs. Mountain.

"I *think* it's St. Catherine of Siena," said the spinster lady.

"She is a very sweet lady, anyhow," said Hereward Jackson.

"Can we be told this?" asked Sir Bussy.

The medium's voice replied very softly. "She prefers not to discuss these things. For us she wishes to be just our dear friend, the Lady Catherine. She comes on a mission of mercy.

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"Don't press it," said Sir Bussy.

After a tedious interval St. Catherine became faintly visible again. She kissed Sir Titus softly on the top of his high forehead, leaving him audibly unreconciled, and then she floated back to the left of Mr. Parham.

"I came to tell you," she said, "that the little one is happy—so happy. She plays with flas—lovelier flas than you ever saw. Asphodel. And lovely flas like that. She is with me, under my special care. So she was able to come to you. . . ."

The dim figure faded into utter darkness. "Farewell, my *dear* ones."

"Gaw!" said a familiar voice.

The gramophone ran down with a scratching sound. A deep silence followed, broken for a time only by the indignant breathing of Sir Titus Knowles.

"Wet kisses," he said.

The darkness was impenetrable. Then Mrs. Mountain began to fumble with the gramophone, revealing a little glow of light that made the rest of the darkness deeper; a certain amount of scraping and shuffling became audible, and the medium was heard to groan. "I am tired," he complained, "I am terribly tired." Then, to judge by a string of sloppy noises, he seemed to be retracting his ectoplasm.

"That was very interesting," said Sir Bussy suddenly. "All the same—" he went on and then paused—"it isn't what I want. It was very kind of St. Catherine, whichever St. Catherine she was,

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to leave Bliss and all that and visit us. And I *liked* her kissing Sir Titus. It showed a nice disposition. He's not a man you'd kiss for pleasure. But . . . I don't know if any of you have seen that great fat book by Baron Schrenck-Notzing. Sort of like a scientific book. I've been reading that. What he got was something different from this."

His voice paused interrogatively.

"Could we have the light up?" said Mr. Mountain.

"In a minute I shall be able to bear it," said Williams, very faint and faded. "Just one more minute."

"Then we shall *see*," said Sir Titus.

"I think we might break the circle now," said Mrs. Mountain and rose rustlingly. The hand Mr. Parham had been touching slipped out of his reach.

The light seemed blinding at first; the room was bleakly uncomfortable, and everybody looked ghastly. The medium's face was a leaden white, he was leaning back in his chair, in which he was still tied, with his head rolling slackly from side to side as though his neck were broken. Sir Titus set himself to examine his knots forthwith. It reminded Mr. Parham of the examination of a casualty. Sir Bussy watched Sir Titus. Mr. Mountain and Hereward Jackson stood up and leant over the table. "The sealing wax intact," said Sir Titus. "The knots good and twisted round the chair, just as I left them. *Hullo!*"

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"Found something?" asked Hereward Jackson.

"Yes. The thread of cotton between the coat collar and the chair back has been snapped."

"That always gets broken somehow," said Mr. Mountain, with scientific detachment.

"But *why*?" asked Sir Titus.

"We needn't bother about that now," said Sir Bussy, and the medium made noises in his throat and opened and closed his eyes.

"Shall we give him water?" asked the spinster lady.

Water was administered.

Sir Bussy was brooding over his fists on the table. "I want more than this," he said and addressed himself to the medium. "You see, Mr. Williams, this is a very good show you have put up, but it isn't what I am after. In this sort of thing there are degrees and qualities, as in all sorts of things."

Williams still appeared very dazed. "Were there any phenomena?" he asked of the company.

"Wonderful," said old Mrs. Mountain, with reassuring nods of the head, and the spinster lady echoed, "Beautiful. It was St. Catherine again."

The lady in black was too moved for words.

Sir Bussy regarded Williams sideways with that unpleasing dropping of his nether lip. "You could do better than this under different conditions," he said in a quasi-confidential manner.

"Test conditions," said Sir Titus.

"This is a friendly atmosphere, of course," said the medium and regarded Sir Bussy with a mix-

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ture of adventure and defensiveness in his eyes. He had come awake very rapidly and was now quite alert. The water had done him good.

"I perceive that," said Sir Bussy.

"Under severer conditions the phenomena might be more difficult."

"That too I perceive."

"I'd be willing to participate in an investigation," said Williams in a tone that was almost businesslike.

"After what I've seen and heard and felt tonight," said Sir Titus, "I prophesy only one end to such an investigation—Exposure."

"How *can* you say such a thing?" cried the spinster lady and turned to Hereward Jackson. "Tell him he is mistaken."

Hereward Jackson had played a markedly unaggressive part that evening. "No doubt he is," he said. "Let us be open-minded. I don't think Mr. Williams need shirk an investigation under tests."

"Fair tests," said Williams.

"I'd see they were fair," said Hereward Jackson.

He became thoughtful. "There is such a thing as assisted phenomena," he mused aloud.

"For my part, mind you," said Williams. "I'm altogether passive, whatever happens."

"But," said Mr. Mountain in tenoring remonstrance to Sir Bussy, "doesn't this evening satisfy you, sir?"

"This was a very amiable show," said Sir Bussy, "But it left a lot to be desired."

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"It did," said Sir Titus.

"You mean to say there was anything not straightforward?" challenged Mr. Mountain.

"That *dear* voice!" cried old Mrs. Mountain.

"The *beauty* of it!" said the spinster lady.

"If you force me to speak," said Sir Titus, "I accuse this man Williams of impudent imposture."

"That goes too far," said Hereward Jackson; "much too far. That's dogma on the other side."

Mr. Parham had stood aloof from the dispute he saw was gathering. He found it ugly and painful. He disbelieved in the phenomena almost as strongly as he disliked the disbelief of Sir Titus. He felt deeply for the little group which had gone on so happily from one revelation to another, invaded now by brawling denial, and brawling accusations, threatened by brawling exposure. Particularly he felt for the lady in mourning. She turned her eyes to him as if in appeal, and they were bright with unshed tears. Chivalry and pity stormed his heart.

"I agree," he said. "I agree with Mr. Hereward Jackson. It is possible the medium, consciously or not, *assisted* the phenomena. But the messages were *real*."

Her face lit with gratitude and became an altogether beautiful face. And he did not even know her name!

"And the spirit of my dear one *was* present?" she implored.

Mr. Parham met the eye of Sir Titus and met it with hard determination. "Something came to

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us here from outside," he said; "a message, an intimation, the breath of a soul—call it what you will."

And having said this, the seed of belief was sown in Mr. Parham. For never before had he found reason to doubt his own word.

"And you are interested? You want to learn more?" pressed old Mrs. Mountain.

Mr. Parham went deeper and assented.

Had he heard Sir Bussy say "Gaw," or was that expletive getting on his nerves?

"Now, let's get things a bit clearer," said Williams. He was addressing himself directly to Sir Bussy. "I'm not answerable for what happens on these occasions. I go off. I'm not present, so to speak. I'm a mere instrument. You know more of what happens than I do."

He glanced from Sir Bussy to old Mrs. Mountain and then came back to Sir Bussy. There was an air of scared enterprise about him that made Mr. Parham think of some rascally valet who plans the desertion of an old and kindly master while still in his employment. It was as plain as daylight that he knew who Sir Bussy was and regarded him as a great opportunity, an opportunity that had to be snatched even at the cost of some inconsistency. His manner admitted an element of imposture in all they had seen that night. And it was plain that Hereward Jackson's convictions moved in accordance with his.

And yet he seemed to believe, and Hereward Jackson seemed to believe, that there was more

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than trickery in it. Insensibly Mr. Parham assimilated the "something in it" point of view. He found himself maintaining it quite ably against Sir Titus.

Williams, after much devious talk, came at last to his point. "If you four gentlemen mean business, and if one could be treated as some of these pampered foreign mediums are treated," he said, "these Eva C's and Eusapia Palladinos and such-like, one might manage to give as good or better than they give. I'm only a passive thing in these affairs, but have I ever had a fair chance of showing what was in me?"

"Gaw," said Sir Bussy. "You shall have your chance."

Williams was evidently almost as frightened as he was grateful at his success. He thought at once of the need of securing a line of retreat if that should prove necessary. He turned to the old lady.

"They'll strip me naked and powder my feet. They'll take flashlight photographs of me with the ectoplasm oozing out of me. They'll very likely kill me. It won't be anything like our good times here. But when they are through with it you'll see they'll have justified me. They'll have justified me and justified all the faith you've shown in me."