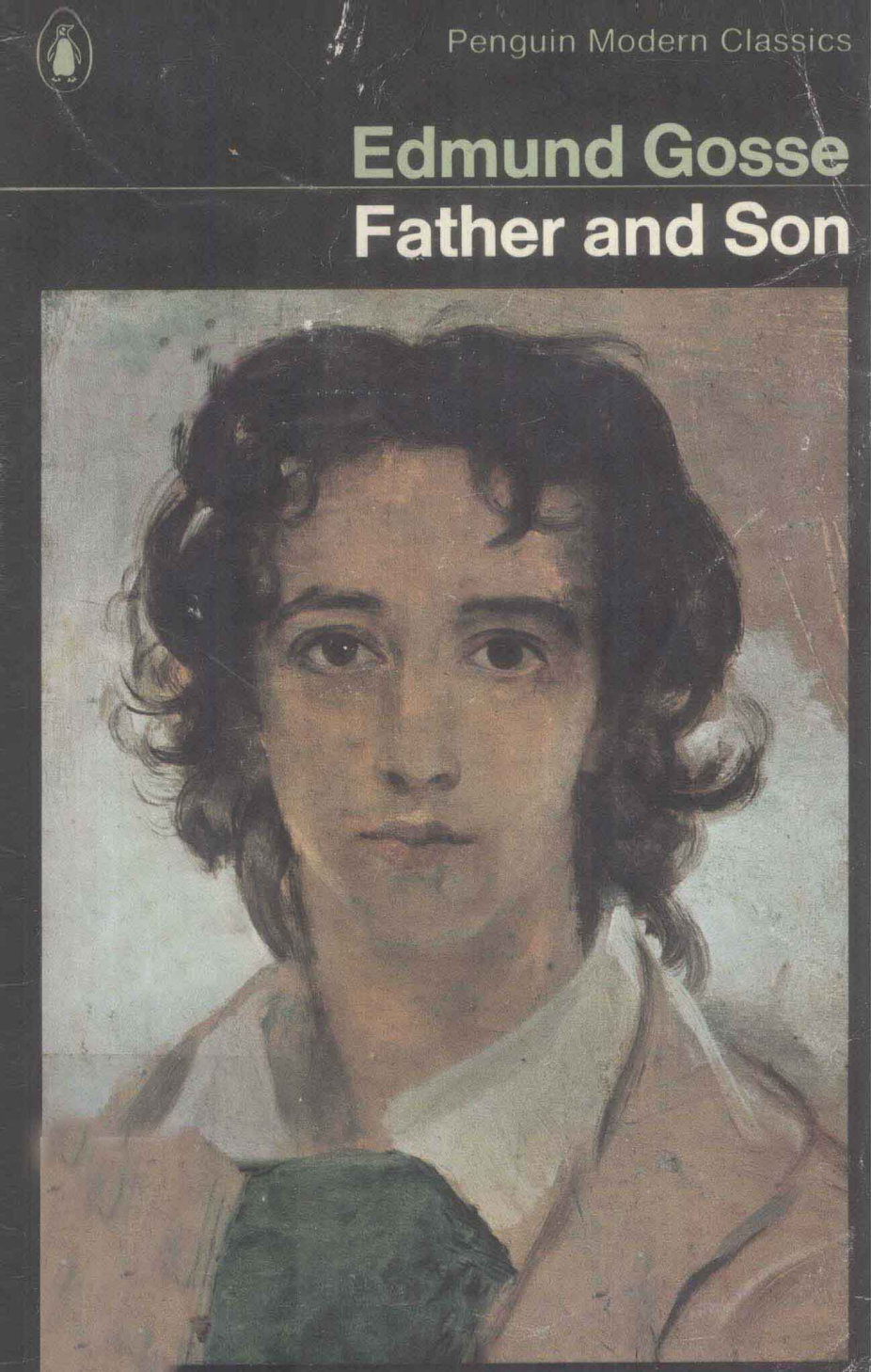

Penguin Modern Classics

Edmund Gosse
Father and Son

FATHER AND SON

The reader of *Father and Son* will need no additional light on its author's life until, at seventeen, his father's friend Charles Kingsley secured him a post in the British Museum Library, where he remained for ten years, making many literary friendships and becoming one of the leading authorities on the literature of Scandinavia. In 1875 he joined the Board of Trade as translator, and ten years later declined a professorship of English Literature at Harvard, becoming Clark Lecturer at Trinity College, Cambridge. From 1904 to 1914 he was Librarian to the House of Lords. Knighted in 1925, he died in 1928 at the age of 79.

Despite the lonely life of his early years, he had many friends and was in touch with almost all the literary figures of his day. Though it is by *Father and Son*, published in 1907, that he will probably be best remembered, his lives of Gray, Congreve, Donne, Swinburne, and his own father, his *Seventeenth Century Studies*, *Books on the Table*, and other critical works, are part of the permanent heritage of English literature.

Gosse married in 1875 and had three children.

EDMUND GOSSE

FATHER AND SON

A STUDY OF TWO TEMPERAMENTS

DER GLAUBE IST WIE DIE LIEBE;
ER LÄSST SICH NICHT ERZWINGEN
Schopenhauer

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PREFACE

AT the present hour, when fiction takes forms so ingenious and so specious, it is perhaps necessary to say that the following narrative, in all its parts, and so far as the punctilious attention of the writer has been able to keep it so, is scrupulously true. If it were not true, in this strict sense, to publish it would be to trifle with all those who may be induced to read it. It is offered to them as a *document*, as a record of educational and religious conditions which, having passed away, will never return. In this respect, as the diagnosis of a dying Puritanism, it is hoped that the narrative will not be altogether without significance.

It offers, too, in a subsidiary sense, a study of the development of moral and intellectual ideas during the progress of infancy. These have been closely and conscientiously noted, and may have some value in consequence of the unusual conditions in which they were produced. The author has observed that those who have written about the facts of their own childhood have usually delayed to note them down until age has dimmed their recollections. Perhaps an even more common fault in such autobiographies is that they are sentimental, and are falsified by self-admiration and self-pity. The writer of these recollections has thought that if the examination of his earliest years was to be undertaken at all, it should be attempted while his memory is still perfectly vivid and while he is still unbiased by the forgetfulness or the sensibility of advancing years.

At one point only has there been any tampering with precise fact. It is believed that, with the exception of the Son, there is but one person mentioned in this book who is still alive. Nevertheless, it has been thought well, in order to avoid any appearance of offence, to alter the majority of the proper names of the private persons spoken of.

It is not usual, perhaps, that the narrative of a spiritual struggle should mingle merriment and humour with a discussion of the most solemn subjects. It has, however, been inevitable that they should be so mingled in this narrative. It is true that most funny books try to be funny throughout, while theology is scandalized if it awakens a single smile. But life is not constituted thus, and this book is nothing if it is not a genuine slice of life. There was an extraordinary mixture of comedy and tragedy in the situation which is here described, and those who are affected by the pathos of it will not need to have it explained to them that the comedy was superficial and the tragedy essential.

September 1907

CHAPTER I

THIS book is the record of a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences and almost two epochs. It ended, as was inevitable, in disruption. Of the two human beings here described, one was born to fly backward, the other could not help being carried forward. There came a time when neither spoke the same language as the other, or encompassed the same hopes, or was fortified by the same desires. But, at least, it is some consolation to the survivor, that neither, to the very last hour, ceased to respect the other, or to regard him with a sad indulgence.

The affection of these two persons was assailed by forces in comparison with which the changes that health or fortune or place introduce are as nothing. It is a mournful satisfaction, but yet a satisfaction, that they were both of them able to obey the law which says that ties of close family relationship must be honoured and sustained. Had it not been so, this story would never have been told.

The struggle began soon, yet of course it did not begin in early infancy. But to familiarize my readers with the conditions of the two persons (which were unusual) and with the outlines of their temperaments (which were, perhaps innately, antagonistic), it is needful to open with some account of all that I can truly and independently recollect, as well as with some statements which are, as will be obvious, due to household tradition.

My parents were poor gentlefolks; not young; solitary, sensitive, and although they did not know it, proud. They both belonged to what is called the Middle Class, and there was this further resemblance between them that they each descended from families which had been more than well-to-do in the eighteenth century, and had gradually sunken in fortune. In

both houses there had been a decay of energy which had led to decay in wealth. In the case of my Father's family it had been a slow decline; in that of my Mother's, it had been rapid. My maternal grandfather was born wealthy, and in the opening years of the nineteenth century, immediately after his marriage, he bought a little estate in North Wales, on the slopes of Snowdon. Here he seems to have lived in a pretentious way, keeping a pack of hounds and entertaining on an extravagant scale. He had a wife who encouraged him in this vivid life, and three children, my Mother and her two brothers. His best trait was his devotion to the education of his children, in which he proclaimed himself a disciple of Rousseau. But he can hardly have followed the teaching of 'Émile' very closely, since he employed tutors to teach his daughter, at an extremely early age, the very subjects which Rousseau forbade, such as history, literature and foreign languages.

My Mother was his special favourite, and his vanity did its best to make a blue-stocking of her. She read Greek, Latin and even a little Hebrew, and, what was more important, her mind was trained to be self-supporting. But she was diametrically opposed in essential matters to her easy-going, luxurious and self-indulgent parents. Reviewing her life in her thirtieth year, she remarked in some secret notes: 'I cannot recollect the time when I did not love religion.' She used a still more remarkable expression: 'If I must date my conversion from my first wish and trial to be holy, I may go back to infancy; if I am to postpone it till after my last wilful sin, it is scarcely yet begun.' The irregular pleasures of her parents' life were deeply distasteful to her, as such were to many young persons in those days of the wide revival of Conscience, and when my grandfather, by his reckless expenditure, which he never checked till ruin was upon him, was obliged to sell his estate, and live in penury, my Mother was the only member of the family who did not regret the change. For my own part, I believe I should have liked my reprobate maternal grandfather, but his conduct was certainly

very vexatious. He died, in his eightieth year, when I was nine months old.

It was a curious coincidence that life had brought both my parents along similar paths to an almost identical position in respect to religious belief. She had started from the Anglican standpoint, he from the Wesleyan, and each, almost without counsel from others, and after varied theological experiments, had come to take up precisely the same attitude towards all divisions of the Protestant Church, that, namely, of detached and unbiased contemplation. So far as the sects agreed with my Father and my Mother, the sects were walking in the light; wherever they differed from them, they had slipped more or less definitely into a penumbra of their own making, a darkness into which neither of my parents would follow them. Hence, by a process of selection, my Father and my Mother alike had gradually, without violence, found themselves shut outside all Protestant communions, and at last they met only with a few extreme Calvinists like themselves, on terms of what may almost be called negation – with no priest, no ritual, no festivals, no ornament of any kind, nothing but the Lord's Supper and the exposition of Holy Scripture drawing these austere spirits into any sort of cohesion. They called themselves 'the Brethren', simply; a title enlarged by the world outside into 'Plymouth Brethren'.

It was accident and similarity which brought my parents together at these meetings of the Brethren. Each was lonely, each was poor, each was accustomed to a strenuous intellectual self-support. He was nearly thirty-eight, she was past forty-two, when they married. From a suburban lodging, he brought her home to his mother's little house in the north-east of London without a single day's honeymoon. My Father was a zoologist, and a writer of books on natural history; my Mother also was a writer, author already of two slender volumes of religious verse – the earlier of which, I know not how, must have enjoyed some slight success, since a second edition was

printed – afterwards she devoted her pen to popular works of edification. But how infinitely removed in their aims, their habits, their ambitions from 'literary' people of the present day, words are scarcely adequate to describe. Neither knew nor cared about any manifestation of current literature. For each there had been no poet later than Byron, and neither had read a romance since, in childhood, they had dipped into the Waverley Novels as they appeared in succession. For each the various forms of imaginative and scientific literature were merely means of improvement and profit, which kept the student 'out of the world', gave him full employment, and enabled him to maintain himself. But pleasure was found nowhere but in the Word of God, and to the endless discussion of the Scriptures each hurried when the day's work was over.

In this strange household the advent of a child was not welcomed, but was borne with resignation. The event was thus recorded in my Father's diary:

E. delivered of a son. Received green swallow from Jamaica.

This entry has caused amusement, as showing that he was as much interested in the bird as in the boy. But this does not follow; what the wording exemplifies is my Father's extreme punctilio. The green swallow arrived later in the day than the son, and the earlier visitor was therefore recorded first; my Father was scrupulous in every species of arrangement.

Long afterwards, my Father told me that my Mother suffered much in giving birth to me, and that, uttering no cry, I appeared to be dead. I was laid, with scant care, on another bed in the room, while all anxiety and attention were concentrated on my Mother. An old woman who happened to be there, and who was unemployed, turned her thoughts to me, and tried to awake in me a spark of vitality. She succeeded, and she was afterwards complimented by the doctor on her cleverness. My Father could not – when he told me the story – recollect the name of my preserver. I have often longed to know

who she was. For all the rapture of life, for all its turmoils, its anxious desires, its manifold pleasures, and even for its sorrow and suffering, I bless and praise that anonymous old lady from the bottom of my heart.

It was six weeks before my Mother was able to leave her room. The occasion was made a solemn one, and was attended by a species of Churching. Mr Balfour, a valued minister of the denomination, held a private service in the parlour, and 'prayed for our child, that he may be the Lord's'. This was the opening act of that 'dedication' which was never henceforward forgotten, and of which the following pages will endeavour to describe the results. Around my tender and unconscious spirit was flung the luminous web, the light and elastic but impermeable veil, which it was hoped would keep me 'unspotted from the world'.

Until this time my Father's mother had lived in the house and taken the domestic charges of it on her own shoulders. She now consented to leave us to ourselves. There is no question that her exodus was a relief to my Mother, since my paternal grandmother was a strong and masterful woman, buxom, choleric and practical, for whom the interests of the mind did not exist. Her daughter-in-law, gentle as she was, and ethereal in manner and appearance – strangely contrasted (no doubt), in her tinctures of gold hair and white skin, with my grandmother's bold carnations and black tresses – was yet possessed of a will like tempered steel. They were better friends apart, with my grandmother lodged hard by, in a bright room, her household gods and bits of excellent eighteenth-century furniture around her, her miniatures and sparkling china arranged on shelves.

Left to my Mother's sole care, I became the centre of her solicitude. But there mingled with those happy animal instincts which sustain the strength and patience of every human mother and were fully present with her – there mingled with these certain spiritual determinations which can be but rare. They are, in their outline, I suppose, vaguely common to many

religious mothers, but there are few indeed who fill up the sketch with so firm a detail as she did. Once again I am indebted to her secret notes, in a little locked volume, seen until now, nearly sixty years later, by no eye save her own. Thus she wrote when I was two months old:

We have given him to the Lord; and we trust that He will really manifest him to be His own, if he grow up; and if the Lord take him early, we will not doubt that he is taken to Himself. Only, if it please the Lord to take him, I do trust we may be spared seeing him suffering in lingering illness and much pain. But in this as in all things His will is better than what we can choose. Whether his life be prolonged or not, it has already been a blessing to us, and to the saints, in leading us to much prayer, and bringing us into varied need and some trial.

The last sentence is somewhat obscure to me. How, at that tender age, I contrived to be a blessing 'to the saints' may surprise others and puzzles myself. But 'the saints' was the habitual term by which were indicated the friends who met on Sunday mornings for Holy Communion, and at many other times in the week for prayer and discussion of the Scriptures, in the small hired hall at Hackney, which my parents attended. I suppose that the solemn dedication of me to the Lord, which was repeated in public in my Mother's arms, being by no means a usual or familiar ceremony even among the Brethren, created a certain curiosity and fervour in the immediate services, or was imagined so to do by the fond, partial heart of my Mother. She, however, who had been so much isolated, now made the care of her child an excuse for retiring still further into silence. With those religious persons who met at the Room, as the modest chapel was called, she had little spiritual and no intellectual sympathy. She noted:

I do not think it would increase my happiness to be in the midst of the saints at Hackney. I have made up my mind to give myself up to Baby for the winter, and to accept no invitations. To go when I can to the Sunday morning meetings and to see my own Mother.

The monotony of her existence now became extreme, but she seems to have been happy. Her days were spent in taking care of me, and in directing one young servant. My Father was for ever in his study, writing, drawing, dissecting; sitting, no doubt, as I grew afterwards accustomed to see him, absolutely motionless, with his eye glued to the microscope, for twenty minutes at a time. So the greater part of every week-day was spent, and on Sunday he usually preached one, and sometimes two extempore sermons. His work-day labours were rewarded by the praise of the learned world, to which he was indifferent, but by very little money, which he needed more. For over three years after their marriage, neither of my parents left London for a single day, not being able to afford to travel. They received scarcely any visitors, never ate a meal away from home, never spent an evening in social intercourse abroad. At night they discussed theology, read aloud to one another, or translated scientific brochures from French or German. It sounds a terrible life of pressure and deprivation, and that it was physically unwholesome there can be no shadow of a doubt. But their contentment was complete and unfeigned. In the midst of this, materially, the hardest moment of their lives, when I was one year old, and there was a question of our leaving London, my Mother recorded in her secret notes:

> We are happy and contented, having all things needful and pleasant, and our present habitation is hallowed by many sweet associations. We have our house to ourselves and enjoy each other's society. If we move we shall no longer be alone. The situation may be more favourable, however, for Baby, as being more in the country. I desire to have no choice in the matter, but as I know not what would be for our good, and God knows, so I desire to leave it with Him, and if it is not His will we should move, He will raise objections and difficulties, and if it is His will He will make Henry [my Father] desirous and anxious to take the step, and then, whatever the result, let us leave all to Him and not regret it.

No one who is acquainted with the human heart will mistake

this attitude of resignation for weakness of purpose. It was not poverty of will, it was abnegation, it was a voluntary act. My Mother, underneath an exquisite amenity of manner, concealed a rigour of spirit which took the form of a constant self-denial. For it to dawn upon her consciousness that she wished for something, was definitely to renounce that wish, or, more exactly, to subject it in every thing to what she conceived to be the will of God.

This is perhaps the right moment for me to say that at this time, and indeed until the hour of her death, she exercised, without suspecting it, a magnetic power over the will and nature of my Father. Both were strong, but my Mother was unquestionably the stronger of the two; it was her mind which gradually drew his to take up a certain definite position, and this remained permanent although she, the cause of it, was early removed. Hence, while it was with my Father that the long struggle which I have to narrate took place, behind my Father stood the ethereal memory of my Mother's will, guiding him, pressing him, holding him to the unswerving purpose which she had formed and defined. And when the inevitable disruption came, what was unspeakably painful was to realize that it was not from one, but from both parents that the purpose of the child was separated.

My Mother was a Puritan in grain, and never a word escaped her, not a phrase exists in her diary, to suggest that she had any privations to put up with. She seemed strong and well, and so did I; the one of us who broke down was my Father. With his attack of acute nervous dyspepsia came an unexpected small accession of money, and we were able, in my third year, to take a holiday of nearly ten months in Devonshire. The extreme seclusion, the unbroken strain, were never repeated, and when we returned to London, it was to conditions of greater amenity and to a less rigid practice of 'the world forgetting by the world forgot'. That this relaxation was more relative than positive, and that nothing ever really tempted either of my parents from

their cavern in an intellectual Thebaïd, my recollections will amply prove. But each of them was forced by circumstances into a more or less public position, and neither could any longer quite ignore the world around.

It is not my business here to re-write the biographies of my parents. Each of them became, in a certain measure, celebrated, and each was the subject of a good deal of contemporary discussion. Each was prominent before the eyes of a public of his or her own, half a century ago. It is because their minds were vigorous and their accomplishments distinguished that the contrast between their spiritual point of view and the aspect of a similar class of persons today is interesting and may, I hope, be instructive. But this is not another memoir of public individuals, each of whom has had more than one biographer. My serious duty, as I venture to hold it, is other;

> that's the world's side,
> Thus men saw them, praised them, thought they knew them!
> There, in turn, I stood aside and praised them!
> Out of my own self, I dare to phrase it.

But this is a different inspection, this is a study of

> [illegible]
> Silent silver lights [illegible] of,

the record of a state of [illegible]mmon in Protestant Europe, of which my [illegible] remains the latest consistent exemplars among people [illegible] reading.

The peculiarities of a family life, founded upon such principles, are, in relation to a little child, obvious; but I may be permitted to recapitulate them. Here was perfect purity, perfect intrepidity, perfect abnegation; yet there was also narrowness, isolation, an absence of perspective, let it be boldly admitted, an absence of humanity. And there was a curious mixture of humbleness and arrogance; entire resignation to the will of God and not less entire disdain of the judgement and opinion

of man. My parents founded every action, every attitude, upon their interpretation of the Scriptures, and upon the guidance of the Divine Will as revealed to them by direct answer to prayer. Their ejaculation in the face of any dilemma was, 'Let us cast it before the Lord!'

So confident were they of the reality of their intercourse with God, that they asked for no other guide. They recognized no spiritual authority among men, they subjected themselves to no priest or minister, they troubled their consciences about no current manifestation of 'religious opinion'. They lived in an intellectual cell, bounded at its sides by the walls of their own house, but open above to the very heart of the uttermost heavens.

This, then, was the scene in which the soul of a little child was planted, not as in an ordinary open flower-border or carefully tended social *parterre*, but as on a ledge, split in the granite of some mountain. The ledge was hung between night and the snows on one hand, and the dizzy depths of the world upon the other; was furnished with just soil enough for a gentian to struggle skywards and open its stiff azure stars; and offered no lodgement, no hope of salvation, to any rootlet which should stray beyond its inexorable limits.