

20TH CENTURY CLASSICS

# A FATHER & HIS FATE



**IVY COMPTON-BURNETT**

*Introduced by Penelope Lively*

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PENELOPE LIVELY

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# INTRODUCTION

BY PENELOPE LIVELY

IVY COMPTON-BURNETT's nineteen novels occupy a curious position in the spectrum of English fiction: maverick, *sui generis*, they are as remarkable for what they are not as for what they are. Detached both from public events and from recognizable landscapes, they concentrate on a Sartrean world: the enclosed torments of family life. The standard situation of a Compton-Burnett novel involves oppression, exploitation and rebellion. Violence predominates: mainly verbal, sometimes actual. In a world stripped of the intrusions of public existence husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants perform a subtle, comic and horrifying ceremony of insult and manipulation. It is like nothing else; her voice is unique, though echoes of its manner can be heard in Henry Green and of its accuracy in Barbara Pym. She has always been a special taste, attracting irritation from some quarters and passionate advocacy from others. But the extraordinary wit and force of her style are undeniable; she creates a world of her own, a world that is a luridly distorted and at the same time disconcertingly apt reflection of the real one.

The families who provide the casts of the novels exist in a state of detachment from the processes of history and the evocations of place. Public events are never mentioned; locations are seldom specified. Nearly all the books have the same setting: a large country house occupied by a family of disparate generations and complex relationships in the late Victorian period. The subject matter is the exercise of power. Various interpretations of Ivy Compton-Burnett's choice of so restricted a stage have been put forward, but the most potent one seems to be its absolute appropriateness for her purposes  
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emphasis on primogeniture, an attendant serf class by way of children and servants, concentration of economic resources in a single hand. Exclude distractions by way of wider social comment or the demands of employment, suspend the characters in time and place, and the way is open for an exact scrutiny of what they then say and do to each other. The weapons of personality and language are brought to bear against those of money and position. The result is tragedy—and comedy.

Ivy Compton-Burnett died in 1969, aged seventy-five. Her last novel, *The Last and the First*, was published posthumously; her first, *Dolores*, had appeared in 1911. *Dolores*, though, is an unsatisfactory book generally regarded as outside the main body of her work which begins with the publications of *Pastors and Masters* in 1925. All the novels are set between 1888 and 1902 (with the exception of *Pastors and Masters* which takes place in 1918). She herself is quoted as having said “I do not feel that I have any real or organic knowledge of life later than about 1910.” The masterly first volume of Hilary Spurling’s biography (the second appears in 1984) discusses the relation of the novels to the early circumstances of Ivy Compton-Burnett’s life: enormous family, offspring of different mothers, the oppressive widowhood of Ivy’s own mother, Ivy’s tyranny over her younger sisters, the death of both of her brothers and suicide of two sisters. “I think that actual life supplies a writer with characters much less than is thought”, she later said, “. . . people in life hardly seem to be definite enough to appear in print. They are not good or bad enough, or clever or stupid enough, or comical or pitiful enough.” And indeed the essence of her characterization is exaggeration, that dramatizing and formalizing of personality that has led some critics to find her people unreal. If her own family appear in the novels, they do so with the poetic licence of distortion; more importantly, she drew, for ever after, on the traumas and claustrophobias of her own youth for the basic content of her fiction—the ways in which people live with those from whom they cannot escape.

*A Father and his Fate* displays Ivy Compton-Burnett’s style at

its most bleak and unadorned. Unlike the relatively discursive *Manservant and Maidervant*, perhaps her finest novel and one which provides considerable descriptive background and authorial comment, *A Father and his Fate* consists almost exclusively of dialogue. To read it is to have an eerie sense of listening to disembodied voices, powerful and disturbing. This is the case with all the novels, but here it reaches an intensity that requires minute attention from the reader: for instance, the absence of authorial information often conceals a silent presence—there may be someone else in the room during a conversation who does not speak but whose listening ear is crucial to what is being said. Entrances and exits are as bluntly announced as in a play or, significantly, they may be so opaquely referred to that the reader can miss them. The book's structure is a symphony of voices; the narrative advances through the words of the participants and through them we learn what they are like. The petulant, self-justificatory tone of Miles Mowbray, the father, rapidly establishes itself in contrast to the astringent and occasionally sibylline remarks of his three daughters and the oblique commentaries of their male cousins, who act—as the young frequently do in a Compton-Burnett novel—as a kind of Greek chorus.

Children are used as symbols of powerlessness, in bondage to their parents and their condition. The three daughters in *A Father and his Fate* have not achieved the liberation of marriage and are denied that of employment by their social status—as miles, with devastating absence of tact, explains: “Would you have them go out as governesses, may I ask?” At which point we learn that Miss Gibbon, the girls' governess, is in the room. Miles, when gently reprovved, blunderingly attempts to retrieve the situation (as he will continue to do, through a series of progressively more fatal insensitivities).

“. . . She does not take my words to herself, or fancy they bear upon her. It does not need saying.”

“The words did not need it either,” muttered Malcolm.

People frequently mutter. Malcolm, Miles's nephew and heir

(primogeniture or male inheritance are common Compton-Burnett plot ingredients), expresses his frustration and hatred with asides. His brothers, the Greek chorus, comment in this way; so do the three girls. Language is the only effective weapon of the weak, and Ivy Compton-Burnett frequently allows her oppressed characters the best lines. They may be helpless within the hierarchy, but within the context of the verbal violence that is at the heart of all the novels they often come out on top. In one of the lighter exchanges, Miles uses words of Christina Rossetti, denies that he has done so ("I never quote other people"), climbs down in the face of his daughters' quiet irony ("Well, I suppose the poet and I said the same thing"), and is further discomforted to learn the poet's sex, his views on the inferiority of women having been made abundantly clear from the early pages of the book.

For women, power is contingent upon marriage. For men, it is economic. Miles Mowbray, as head of the household, reigns; no-one disputes that it should be so, though several question his style of government. But, crucially to the story, his supremacy carries with it the additional weapon of bestowing secondary authority on a wife. At the outset, of course, he has one: Ellen, the mother of his daughters, is alive and well. And then, with typical disregard for the niceties of plot, Ivy Compton-Burnett despatches both Miles and Ellen on a journey, its purpose only vaguely specified, from which Miles returns alone, Ellen having apparently drowned in a shipwreck. And this sets in motion the action of the story: Miles instantly appropriates his nephew's fiancée, Verena (who has herself only recently appeared on the scene—the events of *A Father and his Fate* are precipitate even in Compton-Burnett terms), and announces his intention of marrying her. The daughters are confronted with the prospect of a stepmother their own age. "It is a Shakespearian state of affairs", comments Malcolm, resignedly accepting the loss of his future wife as, with the later twist of the plot, he is to calmly take her back again. His passive bitterness in the face of perfidy may make him seem a barely credible character, but in fact this is behaviour that crops up again and again in the novels.

Compton-Burnett people may rail eloquently against the evil meted out to them by others or by fate, but they often remain remarkably stoical in the face of reverses of fortune. And, just as the subject of the novels is the exercise of power, so the action frequently is concerned with switchbacks of circumstance: the humble are elevated, the mighty fall.

The central figure of *A Father and his Fate*, Miles, is one of Ivy Compton-Burnett's most successful domestic dictators in the marriage of comedy with sheer awfulness. He is a man of unswerving insensitivity, alternately celebrating his affection for his family and beating his brow over their alleged lack of consideration for him. But his finest moments are concentrated in the speeches of self-justification to which he treats everyone at each new revelation of the extent of his bad behaviour. "Is there nothing Uncle cannot carry off?", says his nephew Nigel at one point, with ironic admiration. "I imagined his position as impossible." For this is the point at which Ellen, revealed as alive after all, has returned home to be received lovingly by her husband, who had been on the verge of marrying a girl forty-four years younger than himself.

One cannot but feel that in fact Verena and Miles would have been appropriately paired. The orphan child of a friend, she has been taken in by Eliza, Malcolm's mother and Miles's sister-in-law, and reveals capacities of opportunism that would equip her well for a career in a Compton-Burnett household. First she gets herself engaged to Malcolm, then she dishes him for Miles, and then when Ellen's survival is revealed she makes a bid to save the situation by proposing to the daughters that this should be concealed and the marriage should proceed—bigamously. And when that fails she has one final move up her sleeve and brings the whole pack of cards down on Miles's head by revealing that he, too, had attempted to conceal Ellen's survival. But Miles is equal even to this, producing first a tortuous argument of justification for his actions and eventually falling back on an attitude of false humility: "I have had some hard experience, of a kind quite beyond your grasp. And I have done my best with it. And my best was only what it was. I am



only what I am. I don't pretend to be anything else." It is a fine display of evasion and retrieval, and a dexterous shift from an earlier and more grandiose position:

"... I seem to be destined not to live as other men."

"So it was something as dignified as destiny," murmured Audrey. "And it need not be referred to Father at all."

The conversational formality of the novels is mirrored by formality of scene. One of the paradoxes relished by admirers of Ivy Compton-Burnett is the way in which the lurid matter of the stories—incest, bastardy, attempted murder—is revealed, more often than not, over the breakfast- or the tea-table. The quintessential Compton-Burnett scene is a meal-time, the occasion for the family to get down to the daily ritual of attack and counter-attack. In *A Father and his Fate* meal-times become occasions for the pointed discussion of relative power as demonstrated in the question of who shall sit where. The arrangement of the table is invested with as much significance as the line-up of the Kremlin at a May Day parade. Verena, displaced after Ellen's return, is able to harp upon her previous relationship with Miles by refusing to say how she likes her tea poured—"Miles can tell you."

It is in the course of this particular meal scene that one of the only physical props of the entire novel is mentioned—a silver teapot. And this is not done casually—the teapot has symbolic force; whoever wields it is in the seat of power. But for the rest, we are told nothing: we do not know what the house is like, or its surroundings, except that the estate includes a farm, and that the subsidiary household of Eliza and her sons is somewhere very close. We are given brief physical descriptions of the main characters, as in many of the novels, though the curious thing is that such is the force of their utterances that one instantly forgets these. They remain in the head not as flesh and blood but as manifestations of language—Miles's speeches of devious egotism, the wry and dry comments of Audrey, the awed irony of her cousins, the self-assertion and interference of Eliza.

The secondary and dependent household is another favourite

Compton-Burnett ingredient. The poor relations, displaced by the laws of inheritance or by accident of birth, stand on the fringes of the action, getting revenge, as often as not, by way of malign comment. Their situation may be intolerable, but they retain the weapons of guerrilla resistance: *sotto voce* observation, clandestine meddling, stirring-up of resentment. Eliza's method of manipulation and insertion of herself is to arrive, unannounced, at frequent intervals and usually at moments of heightened domestic tension, under the pretext of concern and desire to offer support. "I am sure Aunt Eliza is good at heart", says Constance at one point, to which Ursula replies, with fine ambiguity, "That is a hard thing to say." Much is made by Eliza of the fact that she is deprived of the presence of her eldest son by his situation in fief to his uncle: required to live in his uncle's house and manage the estate as heir apparent, though granted none of the privileges or concessions that such an heir might be expected to receive. Indeed, Eliza and Miles are a good match for each other in their emotional diatribes about the tribulations of parenthood and the huge debt of gratitude and obedience owed by the young. To be young, in an Ivy Compton-Burnett world, is to be the lowest of the low: dependent, powerless, biding one's time. It is impossible not to relate this view to the circumstances of her own youth, growing up in a household tyrannized by an embittered and headstrong woman, her own mother, whose style of dictatorial rule Ivy herself was to adopt after she had died leaving Ivy as head of the family.

Ivy Compton-Burnett's stylistic austerity has offended some of her critics, and in none of the novels is this manner more keenly demonstrated than in *A Father and his Fate*. Her situations and characters have been said to be "unreal", and indeed refinement of narrative is not one of her strengths: she can take a cavalier line with plot; melodrama is only a step away. But to base rejection of her work on its manner is to be impervious to its purpose. Like all major writers, she is performing at several levels: what is said, what appears to be said, what is not said. The richness and craft of her language give it an after-effect; it is

often only when you arrive on the next page that you realize what has been conveyed on the previous one. The real meaning of the novels—the outraged sensibilities, the griefs, the stoicisms—lies beneath the language.

“I wonder if there is anyone in the world who cares for me,” said Miles, leaning back in his chair. “I often ask myself that question.”

“Then you should answer it,” said Ursula. “It is less safe to put it to other people.”

Compton-Burnett dialogue is peppered with this kind of double-edged response, sometimes capable of several different interpretations, so that to read, or to listen, is to experience just that sense of disorientation that those participating in such an exchange either feel or intend. The unreality of her world is a reflection of the uncertainty inherent in relationships: we say one thing but may mean another; words prevaricate. Equally, within the context of what she sets out to do—this exact examination of the weapons and manoeuvres of domestic warfare—it is a strength rather than a failing to exclude all distractions by way of a defined world beyond the prison of the household. Heads of households may concern themselves briefly with the sources of their economic strength; no-one else so much as reads a newspaper. This may not be life as it seems to the reader, but it wonderfully concentrates attention on that aspect of life that interests the writer. For those who enjoy Ivy Compton-Burnett, narrative melodrama and patrician disregard for reality are endearing rather than irritating traits; you read to be enlightened about the ways in which people persecute those closest to them and how the persecuted respond—the pleasures to be derived are those attached to precise use of language. The style, in that sense, is the content. It is an acquired taste, and one that, once acquired, brings with it illuminations about language as well as about behaviour.

A FATHER AND HIS FATE



## CHAPTER I

"MY DEAR, GOOD girls!" said Miles Mowbray. "My three dear daughters! To think I have ever felt dissatisfied with you and wished I had a son! I blush for the lack in me, that led me to such a feeling. I feel the blood mount to my face, as I think of it. I would not change one of you for all the sons in the world. I would not barter you for all its gold. And I am not much of a person for wealth and ease. I am happy as a countryman, husbanding the land his fathers held before him. I have not let any of it go from my hand. Not a foot has escaped to swell the holding of another. My brother's son will take it from me, as if he were my own. My brother has raised up seed unto me. I look to hear the words, 'Well done', from him, if ever a man has heard them from the lips of another. What do you say, Malcolm?"

"Am I to repeat the words, Uncle? I can hardly improve on them."

"Is it from a brother that we hope to hear them?" said the eldest girl. "Father is exalting his family."

"Oh, I am no theologian. I am no person for thrusting each word into a settled place. A broad survey of a matter is the thing for me. Is it not for you, my wife?"

"I am willing to think it is."

"And it is, my Ellen. I can vouch for it. No one breathes who can meet a question with a wider view. You would not have driven anyone to the stake. I can imagine you going there yourself. Ah, I can see that. Head up, hands clenched, resolve in every line of your face and form! How I can see it!"

"And with some pleasure, it seems," said his daughter.

"With some pride, my Ursula. Ah, with some pride. If there is anyone who understands your mother, it is I. Twenty-six

years I have lived with her and watched her day by day. Ah, I have every aspect of her stamped on my mind."

"And it seems some extra ones," said his wife. "I might send someone to the stake as willingly as go myself. Not that I can imagine either."

"Well, my girls, what do you say of yourselves? Would you be ready to stand for your faith? Put yourselves in the martyrs' place and tell your father."

"We should have to have a faith first," said Ursula.

"Of course you would have to have a thing, before you could suffer for it. Why say what goes without saying? We do not want cynicism and self-complacence here. We have enough of them all around us. I would not rank myself on the side of things so commonplace. I hold to the beliefs that have their own life and do their own work. And I am not afraid to say so."

"He really is not," murmured Malcolm. "Would he have considered the stake?"

"I hope I should be able to hold firm," said the second daughter, in a quiet, aloof tone, as if to herself.

"And you would, my resolute girl. Constance you would be in name and nature. If anyone is sure of it, it is your father."

"I wish I could be sure of myself, Father."

"I could not go to the stake," said the third daughter. "Or do anything that corresponds to it."

"Neither could I," said her mother. "It somehow seems to be a safeguard."

"Neither could I," said Malcolm. "Uncle and Constance would have to go together."

"Oh, well, I am not sure about that," said Miles, looking down. "I might not hold fast when the moment came. I see that the spirit might be willing but the flesh weak."

"Nothing in me would be willing," said Audrey.

"It is hardly a pressing question for any of us," said Malcolm. "But when it arises, it should not find us unprepared."

"Ah, you are an upright creature, Ellen," said Miles, lean-

ing back in his chair. "You would not disguise the truth to exalt yourself. There are few of us of whom that can be said."

"I hope more than you think, Father," said Constance.

"Does Uncle mean he is not one of them?" said Malcolm.

"Well, I may not be. I said it was true of few of us. I hardly suppose you are one yourself."

"I do not care what people think of me."

"Oh, that is a thing so often said, that it means nothing. I pay no heed to it."

"I hardly think I care much," said Ursula.

"Well, you may not, being as you are. What about you, my Constance?"

"I hope I act up to what I should like them to think, Father."

"I believe I assume that they think it," said Ellen.

"And you are right, my wife. In your case there could be no question. What about my little Audrey?"

"I believe I do the same, Father. Most of us have two views of ourselves. One our own, and one to share with other people."

"Ah, you are an honest company. As different from Malcolm and me as you can be, I daresay. I believe women are more straightforward than men. Though they are held to be so underhand and sly. And there cannot be smoke without flame, of course."

"I am sure they are not underhand, unless they have to be," said Constance.

"Few people would be so without reasons," said Ursula.

"An upright person would be upright in spite of them."

"Well, I have known many instances of that."

"Have you known many instances of anything?" said Malcolm.

"What do you mean?" said Constance.

"You can hardly have met them in the life you have led."

"What life?" said Miles, looking up. "Would you have them go out as governesses, may I ask? Would you have them earn their bread? I despise a father who allows his daughters



to do such things. I hold him unworthy of the name of a man. I wonder you can sit and say such a thing before your aunt."

"It did make me remember that I was in the room," said Ellen, smiling.

"Father," said Constance in a low tone, "you know Miss Gibbon is here."

"Is she? Well, of course she is, when we are here ourselves, and she is one of us. She does not take my words to herself, or fancy they bear upon her. It does not need saying."

"The words did not need it either," muttered Malcolm.

"No, I did not refer anything to myself, Mr. Mowbray. We all have different lives, of course. It is only natural."

"And my girls have the one they ought to have. A life in the family home, with the protection and provision that is fit for them. What more could they want?"

"There are other things," said his nephew.

"And if they had them, what would it come to? A family home over again. And I daresay a less good one."

"But one of their own, Uncle."

"Well, whose is this but theirs? You have not come into it yet. You talk as if I were a tyrant and they were martyrs."

"You are fond of the idea of martyrs. Things are not as good as that. A martyr incurs his suffering of his own will and for a cause."

"Incurs suffering! Whatever is in your mind? The house is not a torture chamber."

"Then it is different from many houses. My mother's has many features of one."

"Well, well, your mother is a woman by herself, as we are all agreed. But she has great qualities, has Eliza. She is built on a big scale. You are fortunate in your mother, Malcolm, even if there is the other side."

"People are not often fortunate, when that is so," said Ursula.

"I think the idea of martyrdom ought to be more with us," said Constance.