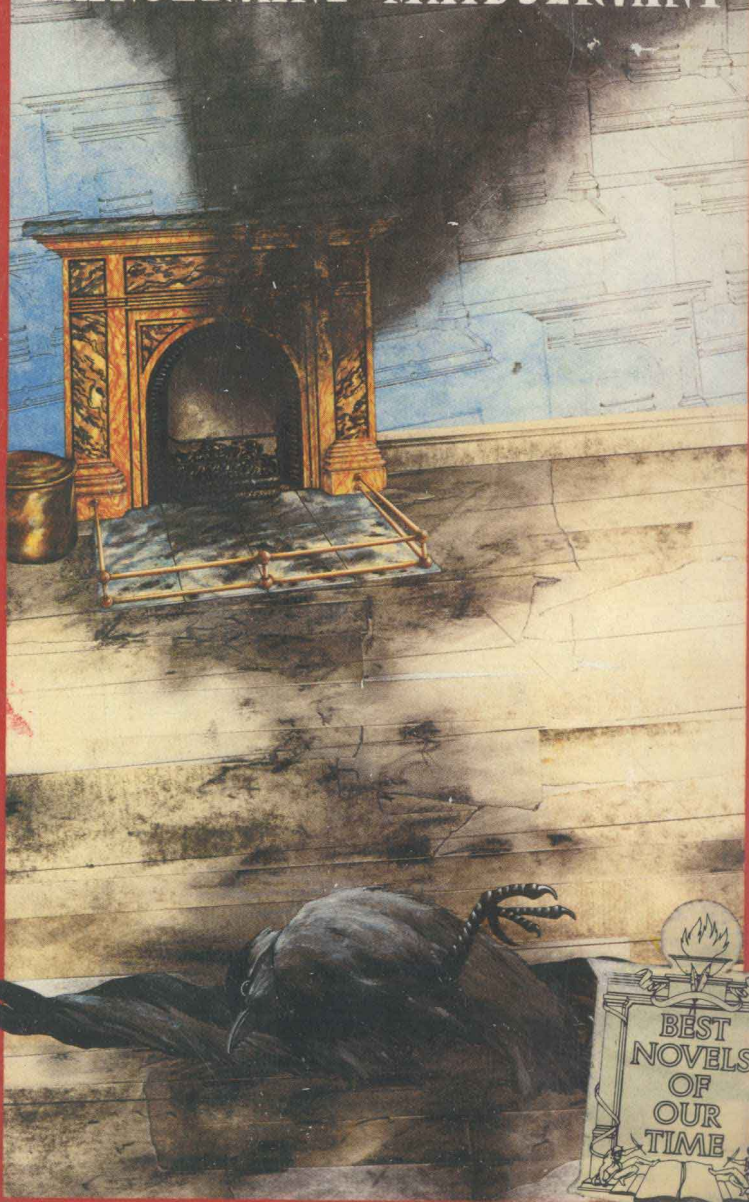


IVY COMPTON-BURNETT

MANSERVANT & MAIDSERVANT



IVY COMPTON-B

*Manservant and
Maidservant*



Introduced by
PENELOPE LIVELY

Oxford New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

London Glasgow New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland
and associates in
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City Nicosia

Copyright I. Compton-Burnett 1947

Introduction © Penelope Lively 1983

First published by Victor Gollancz Ltd 1947

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback 1983

Reprinted 1983

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Oxford University Press

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Compton-Burnett, I.

Manservant and maidservant.—(Twentieth-century classics)

I. Title II. Lively, Penelope III. Series

823'.912[F] PR6005.03895

ISBN 0-19-281380-3

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Compton-Burnett, I. (Ivy), 1892-1969.

Manservant and maidservant.

(Twentieth-century classics) (Oxford paperbacks)

I. Title. II. Series.

PR6005.03895 M3 1983 823'.912 82-19031

ISBN 0-19-281380-3 (pbk.)

Printed in Great Britain by

*Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd
Bungay, Suffolk*

MANSERVANT AND MAIDSERVANT

IVY COMPTON-BURNETT's life was, on the surface, uneventful. One of the twelve children of a homeopathic doctor, James Compton-Burnett, she spent her childhood in a huge and ugly Victorian house in Hove and continued to live there until she was twenty-seven, except for a period as a student of classics at Royal Holloway College. At the outbreak of war she moved to London, and from the end of the war until her death in 1969 she lived there, sharing a flat with her friend Margaret Jourdain. But this bald summary conceals in its first part an upbringing of claustrophobic family tension on which she was to draw for the subject matter of her novels throughout the whole relatively tranquil second part of her life. Her biographer, Hilary Spurling, has said "Ivy used her early experience as other writers have used a body of myth, selecting from it images and archetypes...": the tyranny and the rages of her mother, the oppression by her of the five older step-children (offspring of James Compton-Burnett's first marriage), the rigidly segregated and hierarchical household, the prolonged and exaggerated mourning into which the family was plunged after their father's death—all this was to become the substance of the nineteen novels. It was a tragic family: both Ivy Compton-Burnett's beloved brothers died young—Guy of pneumonia, Noel in the war—and her two youngest sisters committed suicide. By 1919 the family was dead or dispersed, but its effect on Ivy was total; she remained, as a novelist, locked in the period before the First World War. Ivy Compton-Burnett was made a Dame Commander in 1967 and Companion of Literature in 1968.

PENELOPE LIVELY was born and grew up in Egypt. She is the author of five novels (of which *The Road to Lichfield* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and *Treasure of Time* received the Arts Council National Book Award for fiction) and a collection of short stories. She has also written a number of children's books.

ALSO AVAILABLE IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY CLASSICS

Adrian Bell CORDUROY

Adrian Bell SILVER LEY

Arnold Bennett RICEYMAN STEPS

Hermann Broch THE DEATH OF VIRGIL

John Collier HIS MONKEY WIFE

Cyril Connolly THE ROCK POOL

Walter de la Mare MEMOIRS OF A MIDGET

Robert Graves SEVEN DAYS IN NEW CRETE

Patrick Hamilton THE SLAVES OF SOLITUDE

A. P. Herbert THE SECRET BATTLE

Sinclair Lewis ELMER GANTRY

Rose Macaulay THEY WERE DEFEATED

Saki THE UNBEARABLE BASSINGTON

Lytton Strachey ELIZABETH AND ESSEX

Rex Warner THE AERODROME

Denton Welch IN YOUTH IS PLEASURE

H. G. Wells LOVE AND MR LEWISHAM

Edith Wharton ETHAN FROME and SUMMER

Leonard Woolf THE VILLAGE IN THE JUNGLE

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 the absolute appropriateness of its attributes for her purposes. The extended Victorian family offered opportunities for the use and abuse of power unequalled since

the baronial system: an 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 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 publication of *Pastors and Masters* in 1925. Although the novels are seldom specific about time, they are all sternly late Victorian or Edwardian in atmosphere. 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 volume 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. "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 enough 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 members of 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 subject matter of her fiction—the ways in which people live with those from whom they cannot escape.

The quintessential Compton-Burnett scene is a meal-time—most likely breakfast or tea—at which the members of the family, with delicate savagery, perform the daily ritual of verbal attack and counter-attack and establish for the reader the power structure of the household. The family will probably include two or three generations, servants engaged in prurient participation, and its composition will embrace situations of inherent unease such as second marriages, step-children, penniless resident dependants and precarious financial circumstances. The stage thus set, the drama unfolds, and may well include actual as well as emotional violence, implications of adultery, homosexuality and incest, all taking place off-stage and recounted by means of the formal and startling dialogue which is the crux of Ivy Compton-Burnett's literary style. The theatrical analogy is not only apt but essential; in many ways the books—especially those such as *A Heritage and its History* and *A Father and his Fate* in which the manner is pared down to its most bleak and unadorned—are more like plays than novels. There is a deliberate sense of scene, of entrance and departure, and above all of the dominance of voice. To read them is to have an eerie sense of disembodied voices, as powerful and disturbing as a radio play can be, without the distractions of visual description. Furnishings and landscapes are rarely described; props may appear from time to time—a piece of crockery, an ivy-covered wall—but are there simply as that, adjuncts to the plot. The characters are often granted a minute physical description; the curious thing is that none of these descriptions stays in the head, as you read on. Horace and Mortimer, the cousins in *Manservant and Maidservant*, have respectively “thin, wrinkled cheeks, eyes of a clear, cold blue” and “a round, full face, rounded, almost blunt features, a mobile, all but merry mouth”—but as the book progresses we are aware only of their distinctive voices, petulant and self-justifying, humorously resigned. The structure of each book is a symphony of voices; the narrative advances through the words of the participants. The reader is left with a sense of eavesdropping; when the book is closed the voices will carry on, remorseless.

Ivy Compton-Burnett characters speak with studied precision. Here are Horace and Mortimer Lamb, at the opening of *Manservant and Maidservant*.

"Is that fire smoking?" said Horace Lamb.

"Yes, it appears to be, my dear boy."

"I am not asking what it appears to be doing. I asked if it was smoking."

"Appearances are not held to be a clue to the truth," said his cousin.

"But we seem to have no other."

In the briefest of exchanges she establishes pedantry and a position of command in one character, while allowing another a wry hint at circumstances not yet revealed.

The form of her dialogue is at the heart of the matter of the books. Towards the end of *Manservant and Maidservant* Mortimer, writing to his cousin, thanks him for a letter: "It has broken my heart, but that is the natural result of the use of words. When human speech developed, it was a foregone thing. It allowed people to communicate their thoughts, and what else could come of that?" Her characters are in constant, dangerous and frequently fatal communication and to this end she constructed a form of speech which is quite removed from reality but demonstrates all the subtle ways in which people use language as a weapon. Each line of a Compton-Burnett exchange needs to be carefully examined; people may be lying, dissembling, speaking as they think, or concealing their real meaning. Few of the novels demonstrate this as satisfactorily as *Manservant and Maidservant*.

First published in 1947 it is, by Compton-Burnett standards, positively discursive. She allows herself an unusual amount of authorial intrusion and comment and, above all, she indulges to the full her talent for conversations of barbed humour which are also masterpieces of pace and dramatic effect. The servants—Bullivant the butler, Mrs. Selden the cook, Miriam the skivvy and George the young manservant—are given scenes of wonderful hilarity in which the hierarchy and oppression of the servants' hall both mirror and caricature the tyrannies and

hypocrisies of the drawing-room. But it is the children who have all the best lines in *Manservant and Maidservant*: Sarah, Jasper, Marcus, Tamasin and Avery, ranging in age from thirteen to seven.

Ivy Compton-Burnett children are a special creation: totally unchildlike and at the same time endowed with all the ruthless and more usually unspoken perceptions of childhood. There are other memorable groups of children in the novels—notably in *Elders and Betters*—but the Lamb children are given a peculiarly effective role as a kind of Greek chorus, commenting, with unswerving accuracy, on the actions of their elders. We first meet them stoically enduring the cold of their schoolroom (the alternate heaping up and banking down of fires is a potent symbol of the state of the household).

“They all pretend to be cold,” said Horace. “It becomes a monotonous pose.”

“We don’t pretend,” said Marcus. “If we were not cold, we should not think about it.”

Horace Lamb is a tyrant, oppressor of his offspring, his wife, his cousin, his servants. He married Charlotte for her money—“hoping to serve his impoverished estate, and she had married him for love, hoping to fulfil herself. The love had gone and the money remained, so that the advantage lay with Horace, if he could have taken so hopeful a view of his life.” Thus, with one swipe, Ivy Compton-Burnett establishes the relationship; the scene is set for the unfolding of its consequences. A second and subsidiary family is introduced—a typical Compton-Burnett device—whose pressures and machinations complicate the existing tensions. Ivy Compton-Burnett always had a patrician disregard for the niceties of plot and a robust taste for the techniques of melodrama; *Manservant and Maidservant* demonstrates both these tendencies to a fine degree. There is a fortuitous and slightly gratuitous departure (of Charlotte) enabling the events to be set in train, matters of an intercepted letter, a secret passion and a thwarted marriage (all favourite Compton-Burnett ingredients) while

the central drama—the two alleged assassination attempts on Horace—must be quite the most improbable narrative device that she ever proposed. An unreliable bridge, a concealed notice, a stolen knife and other props—not to mention a ravine, an unlikely landscape feature for eastern England—are produced as vehicles for what is the real matter of the book: the study of the manipulation of power.

And it is in their observation of and comment on its use and abuse that the children come into their own. They behave with a mixture of suppressed exuberance—despite their father's severity—and resignation, using the restrictions of their experience to make swingeing points about the customs of the adult world. Kept short of fuel, food and clothes by their father's parsimony, they draw on what appears to be their habitual reading matter for the occasional apt comment.

"Be of good cheer, Master Jasper, and follow the example of Mistress Sarah," said Marcus, in a forced, deliberate tone. "For she this day has lighted a candle that shall point our way."

"Who talks like that?" said Jasper.

"The people in Foxe's Book of Martyrs."

Children, in all the novels, are used as symbols of powerlessness, in bondage not only to their parents but also to their condition: "We are waiting for time to pass", says Tamasin. But the rules of warfare allow to the weaker the right of comment; one of the subtleties of Ivy Compton-Burnett's investigation of the function of language is that she allows the oppressed characters in her books to make most effective use of it. The weapons of position and money rest in the hands of heads of household, the classic tyrants of the books, but it is the poor relations, the dependants, the children who are given the most elegant and crushing verbal skills. Horace Lamb, in response to the orchestrated criticism of his family, is in a constant state of self-defence: "Has none of you any sympathy except with children and servants?" He hectors and bullies but it is the children who have the last word—or the delicately ambiguous word—in reply to his justifications.

"They must learn it is meaner to be selfish. That sort of lavishness is self-indulgence, and that is the meanest thing of all. It has to be extirpated, rooted out, by whatever method is soundest."

"It is a dreadful thing," said Avery, with his eyes on Horace's face.

"What is?" said Jasper.

"What Father said," said his brother.

Discussion of Ivy Compton-Burnett's status has continued ever since the publication of *Pastors and Masters*. Her stylistic austerity has offended some critics, along with the "unreality" of her situations and her characters. She has never achieved popularity as a novelist and probably never will, 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 at 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. Perhaps the best analogy to be drawn is the way in which actions, whether trivial or momentous, frequently take place behind a conversational exchange. Thus, the setting of the scene in the first chapter of *Manservant and Maidservant*—the introduction of the characters and the explanations of their position in the household hierarchy—takes place against the activities of Bullivant and George who are engaged in dislodging from the chimney a dead jackdaw which has been causing the fire to smoke. It is a piece of writing of the utmost elegance and economy: informative, dramatic and extremely funny.

The other singularity of her work is its lack of development, and this perhaps is the feature against which criticism can more fairly be levelled. There is a remarkable consistency of both style and matter from *Pastors and Masters* (1925) to *The Last and the First* (1971); there are variations in theme and treatment but not the sense of the imaginative progress which is usual in the work of a major novelist. Nevertheless there are significant differences of approach; all Ivy Compton-Burnett addicts have

their favourite novel, but to my taste her powers were at their greatest in the central group, which includes *Manservant and Maidservant*. Here her wit was at its sharpest, her characterizations most memorable, her dramatic sense at its peak. Above all, it is a book which is inexhaustible; each new reading prompts fresh insights. This is the strength of her extraordinary command of language; the set-piece conversations—whether they take place in the servants' hall, the schoolroom or the drawing-room—have the depth and resonance of a piece of music. Different emphases are revealed at every hearing. It is the height of her art: precise, disturbing and original.

MANSERVANT AND
MAIDSERVANT

CHAPTER I

"IS THAT FIRE smoking?" said Horace Lamb.

"Yes, it appears to be, my dear boy."

"I am not asking what it appears to be doing. I asked if it was smoking."

"Appearances are not held to be a clue to the truth," said his cousin. "But we seem to have no other."

Horace advanced into the room as though his attention were withdrawn from his surroundings.

"Good morning," he said in a preoccupied tone, that changed as his eyes resumed their direction. "It does seem that the fire is smoking."

"It is in the stage when smoke is produced. So it is hard to see what it can do."

"Did you really not understand me?"

"Yes, yes, my dear boy. It is giving out some smoke. We must say that it is."

Horace put his hands in his pockets, and caused an absent sound to issue from his lips. He was a middle-aged man of ordinary height and build, with thin, wrinkled cheeks, eyes of a clear, cold blue, regular features unevenly set in his face, and a habit of looking aside in apparent abstraction. This was a punishment to people for the nervous exasperation that they produced in him, and must expiate.

"Has that fire been smoking, Bullivant?"

"Well, sir, not to say smoking," said the butler, recoiling before the phenomenon. "Merely a response to the gusty morning. A periodical spasm in accordance with the wind."

"Will it put soot all over the room?"

"Only the lightest deposit, sir. Nothing to speak about," said Bullivant, keeping his eyes from Horace, as he suggested his course.

Bullivant was a larger man than his masters, and had an air of being on a considerable scale in every sense. He had pendulous cheeks, heavy eyelids that followed their direction, solid, thick hands whose movements were deft and swift and precise, a nose that hardly differentiated from its surroundings, and a deeply folded neck and chin with no definite line between them. His small, steady, hazel eyes were fixed on his assistant, and he wore an air of resigned and almost humorous deprecation, that suggested a tendency to catch his masters' glance.

Mortimer Lamb liked Bullivant; George, his subordinate, disliked and feared him; and Horace merely feared him, except in his moods of nervous abandonment, when he feared nothing and nobody.

George was an ungainly, overgrown youth, whose garb still indicated a state of juvenile usefulness, who shuffled, started and avoided people's eyes, but managed to present a pleasant appearance, and could not avoid presenting a pathetic one. He made every movement twice under Bullivant's eye, as though doubling his effort proved his zeal, and the former continued to observe him until he went with a suggestion of flight on some errand to the kitchen. Bullivant relaxed his bearing and turned to Horace almost with a smile, being an adept at suggesting a facial movement without executing it.

"It is to make them do it, sir, not to do it yourself. I should never call doing things myself the harder part."

"Then why don't you do them yourself?" said Mortimer, in a reckless manner.

Bullivant turned his eyes on him, and Horace turned his eyes away.

"I cannot understand anyone's choosing the harder part," said Mortimer, on a humbler note.

"Well, sir, we have to think of the future, when our own day will be done," said Bullivant, taking his revenge by including Mortimer in this prospect, and just drawing back before an eddy of smoke.