

THE PRESENT AND THE PAST

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The present and the past by I. Compton-Burnett

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I. COMPTON-BURNETT

**THE PRESENT
AND THE PAST**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

PASTORS AND MASTERS
BROTHERS AND SISTERS
MEN AND WIVES
MORE WOMEN THAN MEN
A HOUSE AND ITS HEAD
DAUGHTERS AND SONS
A FAMILY AND A FORTUNE
PARENTS AND CHILDREN
ELDERS AND BETTERS
BULLIVANT AND THE LAMBS
TWO WORLDS AND THEIR WAYS
DARKNESS AND DAY

THE PRESENT AND
THE PAST

by

I. COMPTON-BURNETT

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CHAPTER I

"OH, DEAR, oh, dear!" said Henry Clare.

His sister glanced in his direction.

"They are pecking the sick one. They are angry because it is ill."

"Perhaps it is because they are anxious," said Megan, looking at the hens in the hope of discerning this feeling.

"It will soon be dead," said Henry, sitting on a log with his hands on his knees. "It must be having death-pangs now."

Another member of the family was giving his attention to the fowls. He was earnestly thrusting cake through the wire for their entertainment. When he dropped a piece he picked it up and put it into his own mouth, as though it had been rendered unfit for poultry's consumption. His elders appeared to view his attitude either in indifference or sympathy.

"What are death-pangs like?" said Henry, in another tone.

"I don't know," said his sister, keeping her eyes from the sufferer of them. "And I don't think the hen is having them. It seems not to know anything."

Henry was a tall, solid boy of eight, with rough, dark hair, pale, wide eyes, formless, infantine features, and something vulnerable about him that seemed inconsistent with himself. His sister, a year younger and smaller for her age, had narrower, deeper eyes; a regular, oval face,

sudden, nervous movements, and something resistant in her that was again at variance with what was beneath. Tobias at three had small, dark, busy eyes, a fluffy, colourless head, a face that changed with the weeks and evinced an uncertain charm, and a withdrawn expression consistent with his absorption in his own interests. He was still pushing crumbs through the wire when his shoulder was grasped by a hand above him.

"Wasting your cake on the hens! You know you were to eat it yourself."

Toby continued his task as though unaware of interruption.

"Couldn't one of you others have stopped him?"

The latter also seemed unaware of any break.

"Don't do that," said the nursemaid, seizing Toby's arm so that he dropped the cake. "Didn't you hear me speak?"

Toby still seemed not to do so. He retrieved the cake, took a bite himself and resumed his work.

"Don't eat it now," said Eliza. "Give it all to the hens."

Toby followed the injunction, and she waited until the cake was gone.

"Now if I give you another piece, will you eat it?"

"Can we have another piece too?" said the other children, appearing to notice her for the first time.

She distributed the cake, and Toby turned to the wire, but when she pulled him away, stood eating contentedly.

"Soon be better now," he said, with reference to the hen and his dealings with it.

"It didn't get any cake," said Henry. "The others had it all. They took it and then pecked the sick one. Oh, dear, oh, dear!"

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"He did get some," said Toby, looking from face to face for reassurance. "Toby gave it to him."

He turned to inspect the position, which was now that the hens, no longer competing for crumbs, had transferred their activity to their disabled companion.

"Pecking him!" said Toby, moving from foot to foot. "Pecking him when he is ill! Fetch William. Fetch him."

A pleasant, middle-aged man, known as the head gardener by virtue of his once having had subordinates, entered the run and transferred the hen to a separate coop.

"That is better, sir."

"Call Toby 'sir'," said the latter, smiling to himself.

"She will be by herself now."

"Sir," supplied Toby.

"Will it get well?" said Henry.

"I can't say, sir."

"Henry and Toby both 'sir'," said Toby. "Megan too."

"No, I am not," said his sister.

"Poor Megan, not 'sir'!" said Toby, sadly.

"The last hen that was ill was put in a coop to die," said Henry, resuming his seat and the mood it seemed to engender in him.

"Well, it died after it was there," said Megan.

"That is better, miss," said William.

"Miss," said Toby, in a quiet, complex tone.

"They go away alone to die," said Henry. "All birds do that, and a hen is a bird. But it can't when it is shut in a coop. It can't act according to its nature."

"Perhaps it ought not to do a thing that ends in dying," said Megan.

"Something in that, miss," said William.

"Why do you stay by the fowls," said Eliza, "when there is the garden for you to play in?"

"We are only allowed to play in part of it," said Henry, as though giving an explanation.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" said Eliza, in perfunctory mimicry.

"William forgot to let out the hens," said Megan, "and Toby would not leave them."

Toby tried to propel some cake to the hen in the coop, failed and stood absorbed in the scramble of the others for it.

"All want one little crumb. Poor hens!"

"What did I tell you?" said Eliza, again grasping his arm.

He pulled it away and openly applied himself to inserting cake between the wires.

"Toby not eat it now," he said in a dutiful tone.

"A good thing he does not have all his meals here," said William.

"There is trouble wherever he has them," said Eliza. "And the end is waste."

The sick hen roused to life and flung itself against the coop in a frenzy to join the feast.

"It will kill itself," said Henry. "No one will let it out."

William did so and the hen rushed forth, cast itself into the fray, staggered and fell.

"It is dead," said Henry, almost before this was the case.

"Poor hen fall down," said Toby, in the tone of one who knew the experience. "But soon be well again."

"Not in this world," said William.