

**FATHER AND SON**  
**A STUDY..OF**  
**TWO TEMPERAMENTS**  
**EDMUND GOSSE .**

You are not less an Englishman?' he would reply by shaking his head, and by saying: 'I am a citizen of no earthly State.' He did not realise that, in reality, and to use a cant phrase not yet coined in 1854, there existed in Great Britain no more thorough 'lingo' than he.

Another instance of the remarkable way in which the interests of daily life were mingled, in our strange household, with the practice of religion, made an impression upon my memory. We had all three been much excited by a report that a certain dark geometer-moth, generated in underground stables, had been met with in Islington. Its name, I think is, 'Boletobia fuliginaria,' and I believe that it is excessively rare in England. We were sitting at family prayers, on a summer 'morning, I think in 1855, when through the open window a brown moth came sailing. My Mother immediately interrupted the reading of the Bible by saying to my Father, 'O! Henry, do you think that can be "Boletobia?"', My Father rose up from the sacred book, examined the insect, which had now perched, and replied: 'No! it is only the common Vapourer, "Orgyia antiqua!";' resuming his seat, and the exposition of the Word, without any apology or embarrassment.

In the course of this, my sixth year, there happened a series of minute and soundless incidents which, elementary as they may seem when told, were second in real importance to none in my mental history. The recollection of them confirms me in the opinion that certain leading features in each human soul are inherent to it, and cannot be accounted for by suggestion or training. In my own case, I was most carefully withdrawn, like Princess Blanche in her marble fortress, from every outside influence whatever, yet to me the instinctive life came as unexpectedly as her lover came to her in the basket of roses. What came to me was the consciousness of self, as a force and as a companion, and it came as the result of one or two shocks, which I will relate.

In consequence of hearing so much about an Omniscient God, a being of supernatural wisdom and penetration who was always with us, who made, in fact, a fourth in our company, I had come to think of Him, not without awe, but with absolute confidence. My Father and Mother, in their serene discipline of me, never argued with one another, never even differed; their wills seemed absolutely one. My Mother always deferred to my Father, and in his absence spoke of him to me, as if he were all-wise. I confused him in some sense with God; at all events I believed that my Father knew everything and saw everything. One morning in my sixth year, my Mother and I were alone in the morning-room, when my Father came in and announced some fact to us. I was standing on the rug, gazing at him, and when he made this statement, I remember turning quickly, in embarrassment, and looking into the fire. The shock to me was as that of a thunderbolt, for what my Father had said 'was not true.' My Mother and I, who had been present at the trifling incident, were aware that it had not happened exactly as it had been reported to him. My Mother gently told him so, and he accepted the correction. Nothing could possibly have been more trifling to my parents, but to me it meant an epoch. Here was the appalling discovery, never suspected before, that my Father was not as God, and did not know everything. The shock was not caused by any suspicion that he was not telling the truth, as it appeared to him, but by the awful proof that he was not, as I had supposed, omniscient.

This experience was followed by another, which confirmed the first, but carried me a great deal further. In our little back-garden, my Father had built up a rockery for ferns and mosses and from the water-supply of the house he had drawn a leaden pipe so that it pierced upwards through the rockery and produced, when a tap was turned, a pretty silvery parasol of water. The pipe was exposed somewhere near the foot of the rockery. One day, two workmen, who were doing some repairs, left their tools during the dinner-hour *in* the back-garden, and as I was marching about I suddenly thought that to see whether one of these tools could make a hole *in* the pipe would be attractive. It did make such a hole, quite easily, and then the matter escaped my mind. But a day or two afterwards, when my Father came *in* to dinner, he was very angry. He had turned the tap, and instead of the fountain arching at the summit, there had been a rush of water through a hole at the foot. The rockery was absolutely ruined. Of course I realized *in* a moment what I had done, and I sat frozen with alarm, waiting to be denounced. But my Mother remarked on the visit of the plumbers two or three days before, and my Father instantly took up the suggestion. No doubt that was it; the mischievous fellows had thought it amusing to stab the pipe and spoil the fountain. No suspicion fell on me; no question was asked of me. I sat there, turned to stone within, but outwardly sympathetic and with unchecked appetite.

We attribute, I believe, too many moral ideas to little children. It is obvious that in this tremendous juncture. I ought to have been urged forward by good instincts, or held back by naughty ones. But I am sure that the fear which I experienced for a short time, and which so unexpectedly melted away, was a purely physical one. It had nothing to do with the motions of a contrite heart. As to the destruction of the fountain, I was sorry about that, for my own sake, since I admired the skipping water extremely and had had no idea that I was spoiling its display. But the emotions which now thronged within me, and which led me, with an almost unwise alacrity, to seek solitude *in* the back-garden, were not

moral at all, they were intellectual. I was not ashamed of having successfully -and so surprisingly -deceived my parents by my crafty silence; I looked upon that as a providential escape, and dismissed all further thought of it. I had other things to think of.

In the first place. the theory that my Father was omniscient or infallible was now dead and buried. He probably knew very little; in this case he had not known a fact of such importance that if you did not know that. it could hardly matter what you knew. My Father. as a deity. as a natural force of immense prestige. fell in my eyes to a human level. In future. his statements about things in general need not be accepted implicitly. But of all the thoughts which rushed upon my savage and undeveloped little brain at this crisis. the most curious was that I had found a companion and a confidant in myself. There was a secret in this world and *it* belonged to me and to a somebody who lived in the same body with me. There were two of us. and we could talk with one another. It *is* difficult to define impressions so rudimentary. but *it is* certain that it was in this dual form that the sense of my individuality now suddenly descended upon me. and *it is* equally certain that *it* was a great solace to me to find a sympathiser in my own breast.

About this time. my Mother. carried away by the current of her literary and her philanthropic work. left me more and more to my own devices. She was seized with a great enthusiasm; as one of her admirers and disciples has written. 'she went on her way. sowing beside all waters.. I would not for a moment let *it* be supposed that I regard her as a Mrs Jellyby. or that I think she neglected me. But a remarkable work had opened up before her; after her long years in a mental hermitage. she was drawn forth into the clamorous harvest-field of souls. She developed an unexpected gift of persuasion over strangers whom she met in the omnibus or in the train. and with whom she courageously grappled. This began by her noting.. with deep humility and joy that 'I have reason to judge the sound conversion to God of three young persons particularly called to what we always spoke of as 'the field of missionary labour.' The East was represented among 'the saints' by an excellent Irish peer, who had, in his early youth, converted and married a lady of colour; this Asiatic shared in our Sunday morning meetings, and was an object of helpless terror to me; I shrank from her amiable caresses, and vaguely identified her with a personage much spoken of in our family circle, the 'Personal Devil.'

All these matters drew my thoughts to the subject of idolatry, which was severely censured at the missionary meeting. I cross-examined my Father very closely as to the nature of this sin, and pinned him down to the categorical statement that idolatry consisted in praying to anyone or anything but God himself. Wood and stone, in the words of the hymn, were peculiarly liable to be bowed down to by the heathen in their blindness. I pressed my Father further on this subject, and he assured me that God would be very angry, and would signify His anger, if anyone, in a Christian country, bowed down to wood and stone. I cannot recall why I was so pertinacious on this subject, but I remember that my Father became a little restive under my cross-examination. I determined, however, to test the matter for myself, and one morning, when both my parents were safely out of the house, I prepared for the great act of heresy. I was in the morning-room on the ground- floor, where, with much labour, I hoisted a small chair on to the table close to the window. My heart was now beating as if it would leap out of my side, but I pursued my experiment. If I knelt down on the carpet in front of the table and looking , up I said my daily prayer in a loud voice, only substituting . ' the address 'O Chair!' for the habitual one.

Having carried this act of idolatry safely through, I waited to see what would happen. It was a fine day, and I gazed up at the slip of white sky above the houses opposite, and expected something to appear in it. God would certainly exhibit his anger in some terrible form, and would chastise my impious and wilful action. I was very much alarmed, but still more excited; I breathed the high, sharp air of defiance. But nothing happened; there was not a cloud in the sky, not an unusual sound in the street. Presently I was quite sure that nothing would happen. I had committed idolatry, flagrantly and deliberately, and God did not care.

The result of this ridiculous act was not to make me question the existence and power of God; those were forces which I did not dream of ignoring. But what it did was to lessen still further my confidence in my Father's knowledge of the Divine mind. My Father had said, positively, that if I worshipped a thing made of wood, God would manifest his anger. I had then worshipped a chair, made (or partly made) of wood, and God had made no sign whatever. My Father, therefore, was not really acquainted with the Divine practice in cases of idolatry. And with that, dismissing the subject, I dived again into the unplumbed depths of the *Penny Cyclopaedia*.

Perfectly sure that there never was a moment in which my heart truly responded, with native ardour, to the words which flowed so readily, in such a stream of unction, from my anointed lips. I cannot recall anything but an intellectual surrender; there was never joy in the act of resignation, never the mystic's rapture at feeling his phantom self, his own threadbare soul, suffused, thrilled through, robed again in glory by a fire which burns up everything personal and individual about him.

Through thick and thin I clung to a hard nut of individuality, deep down in my childish nature. To the pressure from : without, I resigned everything else. my thoughts, my words. my anticipations, my assurances. but there was something which I never resigned, my innate and persistent self. Meek as I seemed. and gently respondent, I was always conscious of that innermost quality which I had learned to recognize in my earlier days in Islington, that existence of two in the depths who could speak to one another in inviolable secrecy.

'This a natural man may discourse of. and that very knowingly. and give a kind of natural credit to it. as to a history that may be true; but firmly to believe that there is divine truth in all these things, and to have a persuasion of it stronger than of the very thing we see with our eyes; such an assent as this is the peculiar work of the Spirit of God, and is certainly saving faith.' This passage is not to be found in the writings of any extravagant Plymouth Brother. but in one of the most solid classics of the Church. in Archbishop Leighton's *Commentary on the First Epistle of Peter*. I quote it because it defines. more exactly than words of my own could hope to do. the difference which already existed, and *in* secrecy began forthwith to be more and more acutely accentuated, between my Father and myself. He did indeed possess this saving faith, which could move mountains of evidence, and suffer no *diminution* under the action of failure disappointment. I, on the other hand -as I began to feel dimly then, and see luminously now -had only acquired the lit of giving what the Archbishop means by 'a kind of natural credit' to the doctrine so persistently impressed upon conscience. From its very nature this could not but be molten in the dews and exhaled in the sunshine of life and thought and experience.

My Father, by an indulgent act for the caprice of which I not wholly account, presently let in a flood of imaginative It which was certainly hostile to my heavenly caning. My instinctive interest *in* geography has already been mentioned. is was the one branch of knowledge *in* which I needed no :ruction, geographical information seeming to soak *into* cells of my brain without an effort. At the age of eleven, new a great deal more of maps, and of the mutual relation localities all over the globe, than most grown-up people do. It was almost a mechanical acquirement. I was now greatly taken with the geography of the West Indies, of every part of which I had made MS. maps. There was something ,powerfully attractive to my fancy in the great chain of the Antilles, lying on the sea like an open bracelet, with its big jewels and little jewels strung on an invisible thread. I liked to shut my eyes and see *it* all, in a mental panorama, stretched from Cape Sant' Antonio to the Serpent's Mouth. Several of these lovely islands, these emeralds and ethysts set on the Caribbean Sea, my Father had known 11 in his youth, and I was importunate in questioning him about them. One day, as I multiplied inquiries, he rose *in* his impetuous way, and climbing to the top of a bookcase, brought down a thick volume and presented *it* to me. 'You'll find all about the Antilles there,' he said, and left me with "*Cringle's Log* in my possession.

The embargo laid upon every species of fiction by my Mother's powerful scruple had never been raised, although she had been dead four years. As I have said *in* an earlier chapter, this was a point on which I believe that my Father had never entirely agreed with her. He had, however, yielded to her prejudice, and no work of romance, no fictitious story, had ever come *in* my way. It *is* remarkable that among our books, which amounted to many hundreds, I had never discovered a single work of fiction until my Father himself revealed the existence of Michael Scott's wild masterpiece. So little did I understand what was allowable *in* the way of literary invention that I began the story without a doubt that *it* was true, and I think *it* was my Father himself who, *in* answer to an inquiry, explained to me that *it* was 'all made up.'"He advised me to read the descriptions of the sea, and of the mountains of Jamaica, and 'skip' the pages which gave imaginary adventures and conversations. But I did not take his counsel; these latter were the flower of the book to me. I had never read, never dreamed of anything like them, and they filled my whole horizon with glory and with joy.

I suppose that when my Father was a younger man, and less pietistic, he had read *Tom Cringle's Log* with pleasure, because *it* recalled familiar scenes to him. Much was explained by the fact that the frontispiece of this edition was a delicate line-engraving of Blewfields, the great lonely house *in* 2 garden of Jamaican all-spice where for eighteen months he had worked as a naturalist. He could not look at this print without recalling exquisite memories and airs that blew from a terrestrial paradise. But Michael Scott's *noisy* amorous novel of adventure was an extraordinary book to put *in* the hands of a child who had never been allowed to glance a: the mildest and most febrifugal story-book. It was like giving a glass of brandy neat to some one who had never been weaned from a milk diet. I have not read *Tom Cringle's Log* from that day to this, and I think that I should be unwilling now to break the charm of memory , which may be largely illusion. But I remember a great deal of the plot and not a little of the language, and, while I am sure it is enchantingly spirited, I am quite as sure that the persons it describes were far from being unspotted by the world. The scenes at night in the streets of Spanish Town surpassed not merely my experience, but, thank goodness, my imagination. The nautical personages used, in their conversations, what is called 'a class of language,' and there ran, if I

am not mistaken, a glow and gust of life through the romance from beginning to end which was nothing if it was not resolutely pagan.

There were certain scenes and images in *Tom Cringle's Log* which made not merely a lasting impression upon my mind, but tinged my outlook upon life. The long adventures, fightings and escapes, sudden storms without, and mutinies within, drawn forth as they were, surely with great skill, upon the fiery blue of the boundless tropical ocean, produced on my inner mind a sort of glimmering hope, very vaguely felt at first, slowly developing, long stationary and faint, but always tending towards a belief that I should escape at last from the narrowness of the life we led at home, from this bondage to the Law and the Prophets.

I must not define too clearly, nor endeavour too formally to insist on the blind movements of a childish mind. But of - this I am quite sure, that the reading and re-reading of *Tom Cringle's* or *Log* did more than anything else, in this critical eleventh year of my life, to give fortitude to my individuality, which was in great danger -as I now see -of succumbing to the pressure my Father brought to bear upon it from all sides. My soul was shut up, like Fatima, in a tower to which no external influences could come, and it might really have been starved to death, or have lost the power of recovery and rebound, if my captor, by some freak not yet perfectly accounted for, had not gratuitously opened a little window in it and added a powerful telescope. The daring chapters of Michael Scott's picaresque romance of the tropics were that telescope and that window.

In the spring of this year, I began to walk about the village and even proceed for considerable distances *into* the country by myself, and after reading *Tom Cringle's Log* those expeditions were accompanied by a constant hope of meeting with some adventures. I did not court events, however, except in fancy, for I was very shy of real people, and would break off some gallant dream of prowess on the high seas to bolt into a field and hide behind the hedge, while a couple of labouring men went by. Sometimes, however, the wave of a great purpose would bear me on, as when once, but certainly at an earlier date than I have now reached, hearing the dangers of a persistent drought much dwelt upon, I carried my small red watering-pot, full of water, up to the top of the village, and then all the way down Petittor Lane, and discharged its contents in a cornfield, hoping by this act *to* improve the prospects of the harvest. A more eventful excursion must be described, because of the moral impression it left indelibly upon me.

I have described the sequestered and beautiful hamlet of Barton, to which I was so often taken visiting by Mary Grace Burmington. At Barton there lived a couple who were objects of peculiar interest to me, because of the rather odd fact that having come, out of pure curiosity, to see me baptized, they had been then and there deeply convinced of their spiritual danger. These were John Brooks, an Irish quarryman, and his wife, Ann Brooks. These people had not merely been hitherto unconverted, but they had openly treated the Brethren with anger and contempt. They came, indeed, to my baptism to mock, but they went away impressed.

Next morning, when Mrs Brooks was at the wash-tub, as she told us, He]) opened at her feet, and the Devil came out holding a long scroll on which the list of her sins was written. She was so much excited, that the motion brought about a miscarriage and she was seriously ill. Meanwhile, her husband, who had been equally moved at the baptism, was also converted, and as soon as she was well enough, they were baptized together, and then 'broke bread' with us. The case of the Brookses was much talked about, and was; ' attributed, in a distant sense, to me; that is to say, if I had " not been an object of public curiosity , the Brookses might have remained in the bond of iniquity. I, therefore, took a very particular interest in them, and as I presently heard that they were extremely poor, I was filled with a fervent longing to minister to their necessities.

Somebody had lately given me a present of money, and I begged little sums here and there until I reached the very considerable figure of seven shillings and sixpence. With these coins safe in a little linen bag, I started one Sunday afternoon, without saying anything to anyone, and I arrived at the Brookses' cottage in Barton. John Brooks was a heavy dirty man, with a pock-marked face and two left legs; his broad and red face carried small side-whiskers in the manner of that day, but was otherwise shaved. When I reached the cottage, husband and wife were at home, doing nothing at all in the approved Sunday style. I was received by them with some surprise, but I quickly explained my mission, and produced my linen bag. To my disgust, a]) John Brooks said was, 'I know'd the Lord would provide,' and after emptying my little bag into the palm of an enormous hand, he swept the contents into his trousers pocket, and slapped his leg. He said not one single word of, thanks or appreciation, and I was absolutely cut to the heart.

