SAMUEL BUTLER

THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

NTRODUCTION BY ROYAL A. GETTMANN

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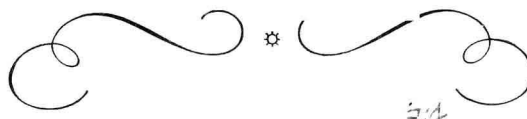
INTRODUCTION

TO

THE WAY OF ALL FLESH



The Way of All Flesh is in part an autobiography of Samuel Butler, who was both the Ernest and the Overton of the novel. The use of Overton as narrator enabled Butler to stand back and look at himself; but it is not a mere mechanical device, for Overton is morally implicated in the events and problems. Butler was born in 1835 in a rectory very similar to the one pictured in the novel. Like Ernest he was baptized with water from the Jordan, and his father thrashed Latin and Greek into him just as Theobald whipped them into Ernest. Butler's mother was an acquiescent woman who, like Christina, sought goodness through abstaining from her favorite pudding and who was addicted to the dreams which her son so cruelly derides in the novel. She actually wrote the letter about eternal life which Butler prints and ridicules in Chapter XXV. In a home dominated by such parents there could be little affection among the children, and Butler's loneliness appears in the novel as the isolation of Ernest from Joe and Charlotte.

From 1847 to 1854 Butler attended Shrewsbury School. Although it was some relief from home, public school life under an imperious headmaster, the original of Dr. Skinner, was hardly an ideal one for a shy, frustrated boy. Having won a scholarship, Butler went to Cambridge where he was happy and began to develop in self-certainty. Like Ernest he contributed essays to a college paper and had contacts with the Simeonites. Graduating in 1858 with high honors, Butler went to London to be assistant to a curate and to work among the poor. He had always been destined for the church, but he was now disturbed by religious doubts. He discussed the possibility of other professions with his father, who replied with the letter which closes Chapter

VIII of the novel. A compromise was reached, according to which Butler was to try sheep farming in New Zealand. After five years (1859–1864) Butler sold his sheep run at a profit and returned to London, where he settled into bachelor's quarters which he maintained until his death in 1902. Thanks to a daily routine, he not only wrote fifteen books and numerous articles, but found time to paint and to compose music in the style of Handel. His favorite diversion, travel in Italy, led to his most charming and mellow book, *Alps and Sanctuaries*. These experiences, and many more, come out in *The Way of All Flesh*. Finally, the fact that Butler withheld publication of the book during his lifetime invites us to read the novel as an autobiographical revenge upon his family.

But if we exaggerate this aspect of *The Way of All Flesh,* we do the book an injustice. We are likely to say that it is a catch-all, filled with stuff from Butler's notebooks. Or we may conclude that Butler lacked creative imagination, whereas some of the most effective parts of the novel—for example, Ernest's pathetic renunciation of his parents when he leaves prison—are not in the least autobiographical. Moreover, reading the novel in this way, we encounter certain difficulties in interpretation: the title is puzzling or inappropriate, and the opening chapters seem pointless.

Other novels, for example, *Pendennis* and *Of Human Bondage,* have dealt with Butler's theme, the self-discovery of a young man; but *The Way of All Flesh* is notable for its treatment of the society in which the hero finds his way. Unlike Thackeray, Butler not only describes the society, but he digs out and examines the beliefs upon which it is based. The most important Mid-Victorian ideals were those dealing with religion, family, and school. Victorian religious faith and practice stressed the following: 1) the Bible as an inspired historical document and as a guide to life; 2) the certainty of reward and punishment in afterlife; 3) the belief that earthly life was a preparation for eternal life; 4) the importance of good works, together with the inverse corollary, the abstention from worldly pleasure for its own sake. In *The Way of All Flesh* Butler probes each one of these. The place of the family in Victorian society may be seen in the novels of Thackeray and Dickens and in the popularity

of the flowered motto, "God Bless Our Home." Butler ridiculed the life in Battersby Rectory not simply because he hated his own father but because he distrusted the family as an institution. Victorian education for the upper and middle classes was centered in the two universities and in the public schools which prepared for them. Butler was less hostile toward this aspect of Victorianism: his account of the headmaster's dinner is hilariously comic, whereas his description of Theobald's and Christina's first dinner is malicious.

The attentive reader of *The Way of All Flesh* will see that Butler did more than air his personal grievances and call the Victorians hypocrites. Unable to accept Victorian beliefs as imposed or inherited standards, he seriously examined them as a basis for personal conduct. He did not deny or evade the importance of moral ideals: he sought to give them an inner conviction. In anatomizing this problem Butler took his place in the procession of modern writers which includes Hardy, Gissing, James, and Conrad. Butler's spiritual dryness and somewhat narrow sympathies kept him from looking at life with the tragic vision of Hardy and Conrad, and he ignored the problems of the artist which interested James. But despite these differences, Butler belongs with this group of writers.

Butler was saved from the gloom of such men as Hardy and Gissing by his theory of evolution, which he thought and wrote about for twenty-five years. In 1860–1861 he read *The Origin of the Species* and in 1862–1863 published articles praising Darwin and defending him against a churchman. Shortly thereafter he wrote "Darwin among the Machines," which he revised as "The Mechanical Creation" (1865). And this essay he reworked for *Erewhon* (1872). More than he was aware of at the time, Butler was dissatisfied with Darwin's view of evolution, and though he had begun *The Way of All Flesh* in 1873, he dropped it in 1874 to begin *Life and Habit* (1878), the most interesting and most important of his five books on science. He resumed work on the novel in 1878 but again stopped to write about Darwin, toward whom he was now openly antagonistic. In short, the composition of *The Way of All Flesh,* completed in 1884, was coupled with Butler's writing on science. The importance of this connection was hinted at by Butler's literary executor in

a note to the first edition, but only within the last few years have scholars discovered how closely Butler interwove his theory of heredity with the characters and the action of the novel.

Butler accepted evolution as a fact, but he found fault with Darwin's explanation of the process (natural selection) and with the moral implications that were being drawn from it. He objected to the overemphasis on environment, and he insisted that natural selection does not explain the stages in the evolutionary process. Natural selection, according to Butler, does not create: it only "operates on what it finds." He argued that natural selection reduced evolution to a blind, mechanical, too-gradual process and that the Darwinian theory lacked "moral backbone" and "banished mind from the universe." Butler maintained that a true origin of the species would involve "sense of need, intelligent contrivance, endeavor, perseverance, faith, and memory."

Butler based his theory of evolution on two main lines: his conception of unconscious memory and his belief in one composite personality persisting through the generations. Butler explained unconscious memory as follows: so-called mechanical actions, such as eating, swallowing, or the growth of a lily, only seem to be mechanical. Actually they once required conscious effort and will power. In *Erewhon* Butler declared: ". . . it is not likely that lilies came to make themselves so beautifully without ever having taken any pains about the matter." Only after long practice can a creature or a man perform an act unconsciously, and until unconscious performance is reached, it cannot be said that a man has firm grasp of his knowledge. A man who has to keep one eye on principles and rules is only half-educated. "Perfect memory and perfect forgetfulness," Butler observed, are "extremes which meet and become indistinguishable from one another."

This theory of memory led Butler to his notion of the identity of parent and offspring, for he argued that the unconscious performance of such an act as swallowing can result only from long repetition which a newborn baby cannot have had. Therefore Butler concluded that the infant must be "*bona fide* an elongation of the life of his progenitors." Or, as he expressed it elsewhere in *Life and Habit,* the unconscious efficiency with which a chick breaks out of the shell means that "it is the same chicken

which makes itself over and over again." But this unconscious memory must remain unconscious through the generations. If a lapse occurs, a man must regain his ability to act unconsciously, in order to survive. Thus *The Way of All Flesh* is the story of Ernest's recovering the Pontifex memory which had been broken by the Victorian self-consciousness about abstract principles. It is the story of Ernest's struggle to recall that which he knew unconsciously when he was old Mr. Pontifex.

But in the end Butler was carried so far that it may be questioned whether he did not cancel out his original intention. Although his theory does put "moral backbone" into the evolutionary process, it tends to depreciate the ethical problem in the case of the individual. If Towneley's graceful, unconscious way of life—and of course an Italian peasant or an English bargeman may attain a similar mastery of his knowledge—represents the final, perfected phase in the development of man, some readers will have their reservations.

It cannot be claimed that Butler made his scientific-moral ideas entirely clear in *The Way of All Flesh*. In the preface to *Major Barbara* Shaw explains that people failed to understand his play because they were blind to the ideas of Butler's novel, which he had drawn upon. Shaw concludes: "Really, the English do not deserve to have great men." But readers can hardly be condemned for having missed some of the meaning of *The Way of All Flesh* or for having read literally the Darwinian chapters in *Erewhon* as a protest against machinery. In these books Butler gives only his final conclusions without making clear the steps by which he reached them. Furthermore, his expression of his ideas—for example, "a hen is only an egg's way of making another egg"—is not always calculated to lead to comprehension and to win conviction.

Shaw's indebtedness to Butler is, of course, well known. In "The Infidel Half Century," the preface to *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw vigorously criticizes the Neo-Darwinian Darkness. His allegiance to Butler is apparent in many of his headings—Creative Evolution, How Acquirements Are Inherited, The Greatest of These Is Self-Control. And Shaw echoes Butler in both the manner and the matter of such sentences as: "How did he [the giraffe] come by his long neck? . . by wanting to get at the

tender leaves high up on the tree, and by trying until he succeeded in wishing the necessary length of neck into existence." As for the play itself, the subtitle, "A Meta-Biological Pentateuch," justifies the description of *Back to Methuselah* as a dramatization of *Life and Habit*. Shaw's avowed obligation to Butler is clear in other plays, notably *Major Barbara* and *The Doctor's Dilemma*.

Although it is difficult to measure and appraise the influence of Butler's novel—Compton Mackenzie remembers the publication of *The Way of All Flesh* as the most important literary event of his years at Oxford—the extent of it may be suggested if we recall the numerous books on the father-and-son problem (Gosse's *Father and Son*), the flood of novels in which a young man finds himself (Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*), and the scores of family chronicles (Bennett's *The Clayhanger Family*). Some of Butler's followers did not see that he used skepticism as a catalyzing agent to produce positive values, and they consequently did not rise above a sterile kind of cynicism and rebellion. But the depth and quality of Butler's influence concern the literary historian rather than the reader of this edition of *The Way of All Flesh*.

ROYAL A. GETTMANN

Urbana, Illinois
June, 1948

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CHAPTER I

WHEN I was a small boy at the beginning of the century I remember an old man who wore knee-breeches and worsted stockings, and who used to hobble about the street of our village with the help of a stick. He must have been getting on for eighty in the year 1807, earlier than which date I suppose I can hardly remember him, for I was born in 1802. A few white locks hung about his ears, his shoulders were bent and his knees feeble, but he was still hale, and was much respected in our little world of Paleham. His name was Pontifex.

His wife was said to be his master; I have been told she brought him a little money, but it cannot have been much. She was a tall, square-shouldered person (I have heard my father call her a Gothic woman) who had insisted on being married to Mr. Pontifex when he was young and too good-natured to say nay to any woman who wooed him. The pair had lived not unhappily together, for Mr. Pontifex's temper was easy and he soon learned to bow before his wife's more stormy moods.

Mr. Pontifex was a carpenter by trade; he was also at one time parish clerk; when I remember him, however, he had so far risen in life as to be no longer compelled to work with his own hands. In his earlier days he had taught himself to draw. I do not say he drew well, but it was surprising he should draw as well as he did. My father, who took the living of Paleham about the year 1797, became possessed of a good many of old Mr. Pontifex's drawings, which were always of local subjects, and so unaffectedly painstaking that they might have passed for the work of some good early master. I remember them as hanging up framed and glazed in the study at the Rectory, and tinted, as all else in the room was tinted, with the green reflected from the fringe of ivy leaves that grew around the windows. I wonder how they will actually cease and come to an end as drawings, and into what new phases of being they will then enter.

Not content with being an artist, Mr. Pontifex must needs also be a musician. He built the organ in the church with his own

hands, and made a smaller one which he kept in his own house. He could play as much as he could draw, not very well according to professional standards, but much better than could have been expected. I myself showed a taste for music at an early age, and old Mr. Pontifex on finding it out, as he soon did, became partial to me in consequence.

It may be thought that with so many irons in the fire he could hardly be a very thriving man, but this was not the case. His father had been a day labourer, and he had himself begun life with no other capital than his good sense and good constitution; now, however, there was a goodly show of timber about his yard, and a look of solid comfort over his whole establishment. Towards the close of the eighteenth century and not long before my father came to Paleham, he had taken a farm of about ninety acres, thus making a considerable rise in life. Along with the farm there went an old-fashioned but comfortable house with a charming garden and an orchard. The carpenter's business was now carried on in one of the outhouses that had once been part of some conventual buildings, the remains of which could be seen in wnat was called the Abbey Close. The house itself, emblossomed in honeysuckles and creeping roses, was an ornament to the whole village, nor were its internal arrangements less exemplary than its outside was ornamental. Report said that Mrs. Pontifex starched the sheets for her best bed, and I can well believe it.

How well do I remember her parlour half filled with the organ which her husband had built, and scented with a withered apple or two from the *pyrus japonica* that grew outside the house; the picture of the prize ox over the chimney-piece, which Mr. Pontifex himself had painted; the transparency of the man coming to show light to a coach upon a snowy night, also by Mr. Pontifex; the little old man and little old woman who told the weather; the china shepherd and shepherdess; the jars of feathery flowering grasses with a peacock's feather or two among them to set them off, and the china bowls full of dead rose leaves dried with bay salt. All has long since vanished and become a memory, faded but still fragrant to myself.

Nay, but her kitchen—and the glimpses into a cavernous cellar beyond it, wherefrom came gleams from the pale surfaces of

milk cans, or it may be of the arms and face of a milkmaid skimming the cream; or again her storeroom, where among other treasures she kept the famous lipsalve which was one of her especial glories, and of which she would present a shape yearly to those whom she delighted to honour. She wrote out the recipe for this and gave it to my mother a year or two before she died, but we could never make it as she did. When we were children she used sometimes to send her respects to my mother, and ask leave for us to come and take tea with her. Right well she used to ply us. As for her temper, we never met such a delightful old lady in our lives; whatever Mr. Pontifex may have had to put up with, we had no cause for complaint, and then Mr. Pontifex would play to us upon the organ, and we would stand round him open-mouthed and think him the most wonderfully clever man that ever was born, except of course our papa.

Mrs. Pontifex had no sense of humour, at least I can call to mind no signs of this, but her husband had plenty of fun in him, though few would have guessed it from his appearance. I remember my father once sent me down to his workshop to get some glue, and I happened to come when old Pontifex was in the act of scolding his boy. He had got the lad—a pudding-headed fellow—by the ear and was saying, "What? Lost again—smothered o' wit." (I believe it was the boy who was himself supposed to be a wandering soul, and who was thus addressed as lost.) "Now, look here, my lad," he continued, "some boys are born stupid, and thou art one of them; some achieve stupidity—that's thee again, Jim—thou wast both born stupid and hast greatly increased thy birthright—and some" (and here came a climax during which the boy's head and ear were swayed from side to side) "have stupidity thrust upon them, which, if it please the Lord, shall not be thy case, my lad, for I will thrust stupidity from thee, though I have to box thine ears in doing so," but I did not see that the old man really did box Jim's ears, or do more than pretend to frighten him, for the two understood one another perfectly well. Another time I remember hearing him call the village rat-catcher by saying, "Come hither, thou three-days-and-three-nights, thou," alluding, as I afterwards learned, to the rat-catcher's periods of intoxication; but I will tell no more of such trifles. My father's face would always brighten when old

Pontifex's name was mentioned. "I tell you, Edward," he would say to me, "old Pontifex was not only an able man, but he was one of the very ablest men that ever I knew."

This was more than I as a young man was prepared to stand. "My dear father," I answered, "what did he do? He could draw a little, but could he to save his life have got a picture into the Royal Academy exhibition? He built two organs and could play the Minuet in *Samson* on one and the March in *Scipio* on the other; he was a good carpenter and a bit of a wag; he was a good old fellow enough, but why make him out so much abler than he was?"

"My boy," returned my father, "you must not judge by the work, but by the work in connection with the surroundings. Could Giotto or Filippo Lippi, think you, have got a picture into the Exhibition? Would a single one of those frescoes we went to see when we were at Padua have the remotest chance of being hung, if it were sent in for exhibition now? Why, the Academy people would be so outraged that they would not even write to poor Giotto to tell him to come and take his fresco away. Phew!" continued he, waxing warm, "if old Pontifex had had Cromwell's chances he would have done all that Cromwell did, and have done it better; if he had had Giotto's chances he would have done all that Giotto did, and done it no worse; as it was, he was a village carpenter, and I will undertake to say he never scamped a job in the whole course of his life."

"But," said I, "we cannot judge people with so many 'ifs.' If old Pontifex had lived in Giotto's time he might have been another Giotto, but he did not live in Giotto's time."

"I tell you, Edward," said my father with some severity, "we must judge men not so much by what they do, as by what they make us feel that they have it in them to do. If a man has done enough, either in painting, music or the affairs of life, to make me feel that I might trust him in an emergency he has done enough. It is not by what a man has actually put upon his canvas, nor yet by the acts which he has set down, so to speak, upon the canvas of his life that I will judge him, but by what he makes me feel that he felt and aimed at. If he has made me feel that he felt those things to be lovable which I hold lovable myself I ask no more; his grammar may have been imperfect, but still I have

understood him; he and I are *en rapport;* and I say again, Edward, that old Pontifex was not only an able man, but one of the very ablest men I ever knew."

Against this there was no more to be said, and my sisters eyed me to silence. Somehow or other my sisters always did eye me to silence when I differed from my father.

"Talk of his successful son," snorted my father, whom I had fairly roused. "He is not fit to black his father's boots. He has his thousands of pounds a year, while his father had perhaps three thousand shillings a year towards the end of his life. He *is* a successful man; but his father, hobbling about Paleham Street in his grey worsted stockings, broad brimmed hat and brown swallow-tailed coat, was worth a hundred of George Pontifexes, for all his carriages and horses and the airs he gives himself."

"But yet," he added, "George Pontifex is no fool either." And this brings us to the second generation of the Pontifex family with whom we need concern ourselves.

CHAPTER II

Old Mr. Pontifex had married in the year 1750, but for fifteen years his wife bore no children. At the end of that time Mrs. Pontifex astonished the whole village by showing unmistakable signs of a disposition to present her husband with an heir or heiress. Hers had long ago been considered a hopeless case, and when on consulting the doctor concerning the meaning of certain symptoms she was informed of their significance, she became very angry and abused the doctor roundly for talking nonsense. She refused to put so much as a piece of thread into a needle in anticipation of her confinement and would have been absolutely unprepared, if her neighbours had not been better judges of her condition than she was, and got things ready without telling her anything about it. Perhaps she feared Nemesis, though assur-

edly she knew not who or what Nemesis was; perhaps she feared the doctor had made a mistake and she should be laughed at; from whatever cause, however, her refusal to recognise the obvious arose, she certainly refused to recognise it, until one snowy night in January the doctor was sent for with all urgent speed across the rough country roads. When he arrived he found two patients, not one, in need of his assistance, for a boy had been born who was in due time christened George, in honour of his then reigning majesty.

To the best of my belief George Pontifex got the greater part of his nature from this obstinate old lady, his mother—a mother who though she loved no one else in the world except her husband (and him only after a fashion) was most tenderly attached to the unexpected child of her old age; nevertheless she showed it little.

The boy grew up into a sturdy bright-eyed little fellow, with plenty of intelligence, and perhaps a trifle too great readiness at book learning. Being kindly treated at home, he was as fond of his father and mother as it was in his nature to be of anyone, but he was fond of no one else. He had a good healthy sense of *meum,* and as little of *tuum* as he could help. Brought up much in the open air in one of the best situated and healthiest villages in England, his little limbs had fair play, and in those days children's brains were not overtasked as they now are; perhaps it was for this very reason that the boy showed an avidity to learn. At seven or eight years old he could read, write and sum better than any other boy of his age in the village. My father was not yet rector of Paleham, and did not remember George Pontifex's childhood, but I have heard neighbours tell him that the boy was looked upon as unusually quick and forward. His father and mother were naturally proud of their offspring, and his mother was determined that he should one day become one of the kings and councillors of the earth.

It is one thing, however, to resolve that one's son shall win some of life's larger prizes, and another to square matters with fortune in this respect. George Pontifex might have been brought up as a carpenter and succeeded in no other way than as succeeding his father as one of the minor magnates of Paleham, and yet have been a more truly successful man than he actually