THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

SAMUEL BUTLER

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FICTION

THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

BY SAMUEL BUTLER · INTRODUCTION BY A. J. HOPPÉ

SAMUEL BUTLER, born in 1835 and educated at St. John's College, Cambridge. Spent some of his early years in New Zealand. Died in 1902.

INTRODUCTION

The Way of All Flesh is the only novel that Samuel Butler wrote; for *Erewhon* and *Erewhon Revisited* are satirical romances, and, for all their excellent narrative interest, *fables* rather than novels. Butler was an amateur novelist, as he was an amateur in all the many fields of thought and art in which he worked—evolution, philosophy, theology, Homeric or Shakespearean research, painting or music. He wrote because he loved to write; he was the very opposite of a professional author. 'I never make them,' he said of his books; 'they grow; they come to me and insist on being written . . . if I had not liked the subjects I should have kicked, and nothing would have got me to do them at all. As I did like the subjects and the books came and said they were to be written, I grumbled a little and wrote them.' So unprofessional an author was Butler that all his books published during his lifetime, except the last, *Erewhon Revisited*, were published at his own expense, and he made a financial loss on all of them except the first, *Erewhon*.

Butler's works, however, written to please himself and unsuccessful in finding a publisher in his day, have lived on, while hundreds of contemporarily successful books in his departments of literature have died. The fact is that Butler was ahead of his day. The social and psychological ideas of *Erewhon*, written in 1872, are still finding fresh acceptances. His great theory of creative, purposeful evolution, as opposed to fortuitous 'natural selection'—of the unending life-stream, from the primordial cell to man—of all life as one, perpetuated by an unconscious memory that embraces an urge to change—this view, set forth with a wealth of detail and pungent argument in his series of scientific-philosophical books from *Life and Habit* to *Luck or Cunning?*, is not only the obvious forerunner of Bernard Shaw's Life Force and Vitalism, but also contains something of the philosophical outlook of most modern scientists.

As Butler set up new sociological and philosophical values, so he set a new standard for the novel. *The Way of All Flesh*

marks a definite turning point in the English novel; probably, for one reason, because Butler was not himself a great novel reader. It differs from almost all novels before it: firstly, in that the author gets inside the characters, explains their hidden motives, and reveals the influence of their ancestors and upbringing on them; secondly, in that he shows conventional ideas and orthodox values as false where he believes them to be false; and thirdly, in that the story is an indictment of family life, to criticize which, even mildly, would have been regarded as unthinkably vile in Butler's day had it not been merely unthinkable. Even now the most modern-minded of us may feel uncomfortable on first meeting Butler's 'long drawn-out patricide and matricide', as Bernard Shaw playfully described the novel; but Butler does it so thoroughly and with such wit and convincing evidence that, as we read, it becomes part of the tradition in us.

The story, as is now fairly well known, is autobiographical. *The Way of All Flesh* 'insisted on being written' because Butler had clashed with his parents from childhood on, and had suffered at the hands of his parents as Ernest Pontifex suffers in this book, and because Butler realized the part played by heredity and biological necessity in what he felt must be an eternal clash between succeeding generations of a family. Here was a theme to his liking, a seemingly original contention of universal significance, which could be related in a story of his own case.

Butler was born in 1835, and so is Ernest in the novel; both had clergymen fathers; Langar Rectory, Butler's birthplace and home as a boy, is Battersby Rectory in the book. All the chief characters are based on actual people in Butler's life; but not all the happenings on actual events, for Butler very properly invented when necessary to suit his theme.

Butler began the novel in 1873, and worked at it on and off until 1885. For a year or two before 1873, following, in fact, the publication of *Erewhon*, his friend, Miss Savage, was asking him to write a novel, and it may have been partly to please her that he wrote the delightful imaginary 'Memoir of the Author, John Pickard Owen', which precedes *The Fair Haven* (1873). She still pressed, however, for a novel, and when at last he found his subject he commenced to write. He sent Miss Savage the chapters as he wrote them, and that remarkable woman helped him not a little with encouragement, criticism, and advice, as we may tell from her letters in Henry

Festing Jones's *Memoir* of Butler. How much Butler associated her with the novel may be judged from the fact that on her death he ceased work on it. She is in the book, too, the character and wit of Ernest Pontifex's Aunt Alethea belonging to her; but she is idealized physically, for Miss Savage had none of Alethea's grace and beauty, and we must assume that she did not recognize herself in any way as Alethea's prototype.

Butler is represented in the novel by two of the characters —Edward Overton, the narrator of the story, who is middle-aged at the opening; and Ernest Pontifex, the 'hero', who runs through the story from birth to middle-age. Overton is an old friend of the Pontifex family, and is able to recall Ernest's ancestors, even his great-grandfather, old John Pontifex, the carpenter, with a delightful reminiscence of whom the story opens. The equivalent of old John in Butler's own family tree is his great-grandfather, William Butler, who was a shopkeeper and, like old John Pontifex, not too well placed in life; the chief similarity between them is that in spite of humble circumstances each had a son who rose to success. In the novel that son is George Pontifex, the publisher of religious books, who stands for Butler's grandfather, Dr. Samuel Butler, the famous headmaster of Shrewsbury School, afterwards Bishop of Lichfield. 'Certainly George Pontifex is not a portrait of Dr. Butler,' says Festing Jones in the *Memoir*; 'he is but a reproduction of Butler's notion of his grandfather, derived from what Canon Butler [Samuel's father] had told him. He is, however, like the bishop in this respect that he was a man who knew how to get on in the world and amassed a considerable fortune; and this was necessary for the scheme of the book.'

Next in the line, and much more important in the scheme of the book, comes the Reverend Theobald Pontifex, Ernest's father, on whom Butler released all his filial scorn. Theobald's mannerisms, his sententiousness, his professional and parental egotism, his selfishness, his worldliness, his be-cruel-to-be-kind code, his cant; these characteristics of Theobald, like the all-too-insufficiently compensating fact that he was loved by his wife, his servants, and his parishioners, are recorded from the writer's observations of his own father. Ernest's dislike of his father was bred, like Butler's, of the father's tyranny over him: thrashings and banishments to bed when a little child, for saying 'tum' for 'come'; threats to cut off his

allowance and epistolary 'will-shakings', as Butler calls them, when a young man.

Never before had the arrogance of fatherhood been shown up as Butler dared to show it up in *The Way of All Flesh*; but it must not be thought that Butler's whole reason for writing the novel was to gratify a personal hatred of his father, and to give expression merely to his own grievances. Grievances Butler had in full—his father's harsh treatment of him in childhood, his tyranny and meanness in Butler's adolescence and manhood, even sharp practice where money was concerned. Butler had enough of the imp in him to enjoy showing his father up, but he knew that the theme had a wider importance. At the end of the novel (chapter lxxix), where Ernest decides to place his own children with foster-parents he says: 'I shall be just as unkind to my children as my grandfather was to my father, or my father to me. If they did not succeed in making their children love them, neither shall I. I say to myself that I should like to do so, but so did they. I can make sure that they shall not know how much they would have hated me if they had had much to do with me, but this is all I can do. If I must ruin their prospects, let me do so at a reasonable time before they are old enough to feel it. . . . A man first quarrels with his father about three-quarters of a year before he is born. It is then he insists on setting up a separate establishment; when this has been once agreed to, the more complete the separation after the better for both. . . . I want to put my children where they will be well and happy, and where they will not be betrayed into the misery of false expectations.'

Butler *wanted* to love his father and relations. He did love them as symbols, because they were his closest relations, the nearest links to him in the vast chain which made all life one. And it was the desire to strike a balance between that idealistic or natural love and the hatred he felt for them because of their ideas and their treatment of him that made the theme ever present in his mind, and urged him to write *The Way of All Flesh*. This dualism in his outlook explains, I think, the apparent contradiction between his dutiful and affectionate letters to his parents and sisters given in Mrs. Garnett's book, *Samuel Butler and His Family Relations*, and the biting comments on the same people in his *Note Books*, in *The Way of All Flesh*, and elsewhere. Butler's notes on his father in the section 'Father and Son' in *Butleriana* (edited

by A. T. Bartholomew, *Nonesuch Press*, 1932) are revealing and poignant:

'He never liked me, nor I him; from my earliest recollections I can call to mind no time when I did not fear him and dislike him. Over and over again I have relented towards him and said to myself that he was a good fellow after all; but I had hardly done so when he would go for me in some way or other which soured me again.

'I have no doubt I have made myself very disagreeable; certainly I have done many very silly and very wrong things; I am not at all sure that the fault is more his than mine. But no matter whose it is, the fact remains that for years and years I have never passed a day without thinking of him many times over as the man who was sure to be against me, and who would see the bad side rather than the good of everything I said and did. . . .

'My most implacable enemy from childhood onward has certainly been my father . . . and yet I do not for a moment doubt the goodness of his intentions from first to last.'

And in that same series of notes he goes on to the larger issue, finding in other families the same rift:

'Wherever I am able to get behind the scenes I find a deep gulf separating successive generations; the instinctive antagonism between the two is far too general to be explained as due to abnormal incompatibility. Nor can it be explained on the ground of serious defect either in the older or the younger generation; the young of one generation becomes the old of the next, and both old and young always seem good sort of people enough to every one except their own near belongings.

'The explanation is, rather, that the general antipathy between parents and children is part of the same story with the antipathy that prevails throughout nature between an incipient species and the unmodified individuals of the race from which it is arising.

'The first thing which a new form does is to exterminate its predecessor; the old form knows this, and will therefore do its best to prevent the new form arising. Every generation is a new species up to a certain point—and hence every older generation regards it with suspicion. That this indeed is so is plain from the fact that the least modified young men and women—the ones who are most nearly facsimiles of their parents—get on best with them.'

Butler, of all people, was not one of the 'least modified' of his generation. He was the *enfant terrible* of theology, science, and literature. Every book he published was a knife thrust in the convention-loving breast of his father, who, indeed, ascribed the death of Butler's mother to the shock sustained by her on learning that her son was the author of *Erewhon*. So low could Canon Butler stoop in order to hurt his son's feelings! If we know Butler's own life story we cannot be surprised when we read in *The Way of All Flesh* that 'the two people whom Ernest regarded as the most dangerous enemies he had in all the world were his father and mother'.

Christina, Theobald's wife, Ernest's mother, is modelled very closely on Butler's mother. Her day-dreams and 'reveries', in which she usually sees herself and her family in glamorous settings, marrying into the peerage, or leading an evangelical revival and by way of finalé publicly ascending to heaven: these are said to be drawn from Mrs. Butler's own day-dreams, though how her son knew of her private flights of fancy is hard to say. The now famous letter to 'My two dear boys' (chapter xxv in the novel), which Christina writes just before her confinement, under a presentiment that she will not survive it, and endorses as to be given to her sons when Ernest is sixteen years old, is taken word for word from a letter Butler's mother wrote to her sons before the birth of her younger daughter, Mary.

The mother's letter is not the only instance of actual letters from Butler's parents being used in the novel. The correspondence between Theobald and his father, George Pontifex, in chapter viii is drawn from Butler's own correspondence with his father at the time of his refusal to become a clergyman. The *Memoir* states (vol. i, p. 61): 'In *The Way of All Flesh* Ernest does not refuse to be ordained; this was because Butler wanted him to take orders before finding out that he did not believe. It seemed, however, a pity to waste all this correspondence; he therefore stiffened Theobald's back for the occasion, and made the kicking at ordination come from him instead of from Ernest, so that George Pontifex might write Canon Butler's letters, or letters as like them as the alteration of circumstances allowed. Theobald was not a good kicker; but Butler thought that what he made him do would not appear incompatible with his character since it was done in his youth it would pass as a kind of wild oat. . . . In *The Way of All Flesh* the letters are fewer and shorter than they

were in real life, partly because Theobald was easily subdued, and partly because the episode, affecting only Theobald and not Ernest, was not of prime importance'.

To return to Christina, there is no doubt that Butler's dislike of his mother was not so active as of his father, and Christina is rather a light relief after her more seriously treated husband. Ernest saw his mother chiefly as a spy, and to some extent an *agent provocateur*, on behalf of his father. This is shown in the novel in the 'sofa talks' between them, those talks in which, having cornered Ernest on the sofa, and made escape impossible, she proceeds by words of mother love, cajolings, and entreaties, and under pledges of secrecy, to extract confessions from Ernest, which she shortly gives away to Ernest's father. Butler calls it her domestic confidence trick.

The only other members of Butler's family enshrined in the novel are his two sisters, Harriet and May, who become a single personality, Ernest's sister, Charlotte. She is depicted as a rather selfish shrew, not really fond of her parents, but studiously correct and conventional in her treatment of them, and full of sullen fight towards Ernest for his recalcitrance. Butler, it is true, never liked his sisters; he sent them postcards from places he visited throughout his life, but more he could not do. On his death-bed one of his chief anxieties was that they should be prevented from visiting him. Butler knew that they distrusted him and his ideas. Mrs. R. S. Garnett's *Samuel Butler and His Family Relations*, which was published comparatively recently, contained the following revelation of the length to which sister Harriet's distrust of his ideas carried her at the beginning of Butler's fatal illness, when she had an opportunity of being of assistance:

'When Butler was taken ill abroad (writes Mrs. Garnett) and his devoted man, Alfred, was sent to Naples to nurse him and bring him home, the yacht of one of Harriet's nephews by marriage was lying off the coast, and offered a pleasant and easy means of conveyance. But Harriet dared not expose a young man to the contaminating influence of the infidel. It actually was so real a dread that she would not allow the nephew to hear of the circumstance, and he did not know till long afterwards that he might have been of use.'

Outside Butler's family a few characters in the novel are drawn from known figures in real life. The most important has already been mentioned—Miss Savage as Aunt Alethea.

Another is Ernest's landlady at the slum settlement, Mrs. Jupp. She is drawn from a garrulous, morally loose but thoroughly happy, woman who 'did' for a cousin of Butler's, and whose real name was Mrs. Boss. Butler used to visit this cousin, and found Mrs. Boss's 'broad talk', as she herself called it, very amusing; but he liked her because she was free and joyful in her own way, and suffering from no restraints or complexes. So into the book she went—modified, of course, for decency's sake. 'The famous Dr. Skinner of Roughborough', Ernest's headmaster, is a reproduction of Butler's own master at Shrewsbury, Dr. Kennedy. Towneley, the bold, happy man-about-town (good-looking, well-to-do, commanding without being offensive) is said to be drawn from Charles Paine Pauli, a man whom Butler first met in New Zealand, and to whose personality he was much attracted. As readers of the *Memoir* will know, Pauli bled Butler for a great deal of money over a period of many years, mostly during times when Butler had scarcely enough for his own modest wants. (There was no reason for this, except wild generosity and a mistaken sense of duty on Butler's part, and deceit and 'sponging' on Pauli's.) That part of Pauli's character does not line up with the portrait of Towneley. The insidious preacher in the novel, Pryer, who inveigles the youthful Ernest when at the slum settlement into entrusting him with his money for speculation and never returns any of it—he might be Pauli, or rather his treatment of Ernest might be Pauli's treatment of Butler. The loss of a considerable sum of money by speculation was Butler's actual experience as well as Ernest's, but the agent—innocent in the real incident—was not Pauli, but another friend of Butler's, Charles Hoare.

Butler drew on real people where they best illustrated his case. Towneley is in this respect an important character in the novel, for he represents the result of the very opposite kind of upbringing to Ernest's or Butler's. 'With a great price Ernest obtained his freedom, but Towneley was born free.' Towneley is the healthy, confident man, grown from free and happy childhood; Ernest, the uncertain, physically-weak and financially-worried man, whose child life has been one of repression and unhappiness. Not until middle life does Ernest overcome his inferiority complex, and attain that manliness of body and mind which his upbringing had denied him. When at last he becomes a man we find that Overton—that is, Butler—on seeing Ernest off for a visit to

his parents' home (chapter lxxxii) 'was pleased to see how well his tailor had done by him. Towneley himself could not have been appointed more becomingly. . . . There was an air of *insouciance* and good humour upon his face as of a man with whom everything is going perfectly right, which would have made a much plainer man good-looking. I was proud of him, and delighted with him. "I am sure", I said to myself, "that whatever else he may do, he will never marry again."'

The impish Butler, who thus throws a shaft against marriage, is still serious in intent, for he undoubtedly did not like the idea of married life. He lived and died a bachelor, having spent the greater number of his years in the same rooms in Clifford's Inn, Fleet Street, looked after by charwomen and his devoted companion-manservant, Alfred Cathie, who figures so delightfully in the *Memoir*. Butler's fear of marriage was one with his dislike of family life in general. In his experience, and he felt it was the experience of most people, it endangered independence and, worse still, it often involved tyranny—tyranny of parent over child, and husband over wife, or *vice versa*!

'It seems to me', says the mature Ernest, 'that the family is a survival of the principle which is more logically embodied in the compound animal—and the compound animal is a form of life which has been found incompatible with high development. I would do with a family among mankind what nature has done with the compound animal, and confine it to the lower and less progressive races. Certainly there is no inherent love for the family system on the part of nature herself. Poll the forms of life and you will find it in a ridiculously small minority. The fishes know it not, and they get along quite nicely. The ants and the bees, who far outnumber man, sting their fathers to death as a matter of course, and are given to the atrocious mutilation of nine-tenths of the offspring committed to their charge, yet where shall we find communities more universally respected? Take the cuckoo again—is there any bird which we like better?'

It would be wrong to give the impression that *The Way of All Flesh* is merely a vehicle of iconoclastic notions. Its moral theme and its irony are subtly interwoven into a finely constructed story. The characters are built up in great detail, and by the deftest of touches. The observation of domestic

life in the book make it a unique record of the modes and manners of its own period and place. In sheer narrative interest it is compelling reading. Here is the life story of one who, born about the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, finds that if he is to enjoy the material comforts which his parents' position offers he must first submit to and overcome spiritual discomfort. He refuses to submit, with consequent material discomfort. Disobedience and discovery, revolt and punishment, become his lot, and play their part in shaping the complete man. Daily minor occurrences are hardly less important in effect than major episodes, such as the giving of his watch to the maidservant Ellen after she (*enceinte*) has been cast out of the rectory, and the consequences of that gift. Ernest's father discovers the watch in a shop in the adjacent town, whither he goes to buy the boy another watch to replace the one that is reported to have been accidently lost! The discovery of Ellen's and Ernest's crimes, and the retribution that comes to them are set forth in scenes and encounters that are among the most memorable in fiction—the encounters of Mr. and Mrs. Pontifex versus Ellen; Ernest and Ellen (a secret but innocent friendship); Ernest and his mother (the 'sofa-talk' in chapter xl); and finally Ernest versus his father—with John, the coachman (no doubt conscience-stricken where Ellen is concerned), defending Ernest from a possible thrashing, and suffering dismissal.

Ernest at Cambridge, and Ernest at the slum settlement, follow—after which he goes downhill by a series of misfortunes that would never have come his way had he been more sensibly brought up. He loses his money, owing to excessive faith. He suddenly rushes to attain sexual experience, owing to unnatural repression of sexual thoughts hitherto; and, choosing the wrong type of girl owing to his ignorance, he goes to prison. In prison comes his real awakening, and his desire for a total break with his parents develops into a passion. 'And he brooded over the bliss of Melchisedek who had been born an orphan, without father, without mother, and without descent.'

When he leaves prison Overton (who, under the will of Aunt Alethea, since dead, is holding some thousands of pounds for Ernest, of which he knows nothing, and which he may not receive until he is twenty-eight) meets Ernest and looks after him until he can find work. At this stage Ernest runs across his father's former maid Ellen in the street, and marries

her. The experiences that follow are perhaps the bitterest that Ernest goes through; though not untouched by pleasure, for Ellen, simple, beautiful in face and body, is undoubtedly his taste in woman. The couple eventually run a second-hand clothes shop, have two babies, and then Ellen turns (or rather returns) to heavy drinking and dilirium tremens. For a long while Ernest is deceived into thinking that she is merely ill and never realizes the real life she is leading; but eventually he sees the truth and separates from her, having discovered that she has a prior husband living—John, the coachman. Thence on, having achieved manhood and tranquillity out of hard experience, he is saved; and coming at last, and to his utter and delighted surprise, into Aunt Alethea's money, we leave him physically and intellectually complete—in bearing a Towneley, and in the literary work in which he now indulges a veritable Samuel Butler! And his children he leaves to foster parents, happy to save them the pain of having a father and a mother.

Butler himself never went to prison, never married, and he had no children. He would probably have liked to have been a father provided he could have found the right mother, and provided he could have avoided family life. The following is a note headed 'My Son' to be found in his *Note-Books*:

'I have often told my son that he must begin by finding me a wife to become his mother who shall satisfy both himself and me. But this is only one of the many rocks on which we have hitherto slipped. We should never have got on together; I should have had to cut him off with a shilling either for laughing at Homer, or for refusing to laugh at him, or both, or neither, but still cut him off. So I settled the matter long ago by turning a deaf ear to his importunities and sticking to it that I would not get him at all. Yet his thin ghost visits me at times, and though he knows that it is no use pestering me further, he looks at me so wistfully and reproachfully that I am half inclined to turn tail, take my chance about his mother, and ask me to let me get him after all. But I should show a clean pair of heels if he said "Yes". Besides, he would probably be a girl.'

The moving and beautiful passages in *Erewhon Revisited*, where the returned Higgs converses with the forest ranger, George, knowing him to be his son, but on pain of death unable to reveal his identity, are good examples of Butler's ideal of the father-and-son relationship. So the reader must square the kinder, more human Butler, who writes notes about an

imaginary son or endows his prototype Higgs with deep paternal emotion, with the satyr who so relentlessly mocks parents in *The Way of All Flesh*, and who deliberately and with apparent delight knocks down our most cherished beliefs in family life.

Much as Butler did not mind upsetting complacent ideas about family life in general, he could not bring himself to wound the living members of his own family by publishing, while any of them remained alive, this novel in which they could readily recognise themselves. So it remained in manuscript at the time of Butler's death, 18th June 1902, when by Butler's will the right in it passed, with his other writings, to his literary executor, R. A. Streatfeild, an official of the British Museum Reading Room, and an enthusiast for Handel's music—both excellent points of contact with Butler. (Butler wrote the greater part of *The Way of All Flesh* in the Reading Room, and the MS. of it is now in the British Museum, the gift of Henry Festing Jones.) It may appear surprising that Streatfeild was chosen by Butler in preference to his great friend, Festing Jones, but Butler thought Streatfeild was the better man of business and more likely to make a success of publishing his books. 'Streatfeild had in Butler's eyes the recommendation of having already induced a firm to publish books written by him without himself having to spend any money on them—a thing which Butler had failed to do' (vide *Memoir*). Although it was Festing Jones who played the overwhelmingly greater part (by editing the *Note-Books*, writing the *Memoir*, and in many many other ways) in gaining for Butler's work and ideas the recognition they now have, it can fairly be said that Butler's faith in Streatfeild was rightly placed, for Streatfeild carried through a systematic re-issuing of the earlier works from the old sheets, a re-issuing which contributed largely towards Butler being taken up by the reading public.

It was certainly Streatfeild's literary executorship that brought *The Way of All Flesh* to publication within a year of Butler's death. Festing Jones himself has said that had the rights been vested in him he could not have published the novel while the sisters lived. Streatfeild did not know Butler's relatives, and to him the novel was fiction, not fact, and he had no scruples about publishing it as soon as possible. Moreover, he considered Butler had not wanted him to delay publication; in his Note to the first edition he says: 'On Butler's death-bed he gave me clearly to understand that he wished it to be