

SAMUEL
BUTLER

THE ENGLISH NOVELISTS

**SAMUEL BUTLER AND
*THE WAY OF ALL FLESH***

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by

G. D. H. COLE

LITHO

HOME & VAN THAL LTD.

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CHAPTER I

WHO BUTLER WAS

IN Samuel Butler's novel, *The Way of All Flesh*, is cited an essay which the "hero," Ernest Pontifex, is supposed to have contributed to an undergraduate magazine. It contains these words, "It happens that a faithful rendering of contemporary life is the very quality which gives its most permanent interest to any work of fiction, whether in literature or painting." I do not know whether this sentiment was derived from some undergraduate effort of Butler's own, or was written for the purpose of being put into Ernest's mouth : in either case it expresses equally well one of the things that give *The Way of All Flesh* its assured place among English novels, and probably the thing on which Butler would have insisted most strongly if he had been asked to assess the value of his book. Yet "faithful rendering of contemporary life" is only one of the great qualities of Butler's novel, and there are still many who dispute the faithfulness of his presentation. A second quality of the book, plain on the surface, is its satire ; and it is to be admitted that the satirist always in some degree distorts the original. What Butler would have denied is that his satire distorts *more* than any personal record free from all satire would have done. One can imagine—indeed, it is rather fun to imagine—the story of *The Way of All Flesh* written from a quite different point of view—say from that of Ernest Pontifex's (or Butler's) brother or sister. The picture would have been quite different from Butler's picture ; but, had it been a most

“faithful rendering of contemporary life,” would it have been nearer the truth, or a good deal farther away? It would have brought out much that is not brought out in the novel as it is; but, at least as much, Butler’s novel brings out much of which it would have given no inkling. No picture of contemporary life is either the whole truth, or wholly true: every such picture, “whether in literature or painting,” is somebody’s view of the truth, not the truth itself. It is the satirist’s business to get at bits of the truth which the accepted valuations of his contemporaries obscure. That is what Butler did, both in *The Way of All Flesh* and in *Erewhon* and *Erewhon Revisited*. It is a pity that we have not Theobald’s or Canon Butler’s view of the story, as well as Samuel Butler’s; for the two would make a pretty pair. At all events, what we get in *The Way of All Flesh* is not simply a “faithful rendering of contemporary life,” but a satirical rendering—that is, a version written from the standpoint of a set of values which are a long distance away from those of the main characters in the story.

There is a third quality in *The Way of All Flesh*, which gives it, as satire, a special character. The satirist must have positive values of his own: he cannot write good satire if he is merely denying, or scoffing at, the values which most of his contemporaries profess, and appear to accept. He must know where he stands, and must imply, though he need not state, an alternative to what he denies. Mere debunking soon palls—alas, that so many would-be satirists do not know this. The satirist makes his hits, or at any rate keeps them up, only if he is a philosopher as well, in the best and least professional sense of the word. He must know what he likes and approves; and his likings and approvals must be, not a mere bundle of contrarities, but a creed that a man can live by.

For what is the point of satire, unless there is a real art of living, and a way of life that does make tolerable sense? Butler believed there was such a way, and did his best to point to it. He was not only a satirist, giving from the satirist's standpoint "a faithful rendering of contemporary life": he was also a constructive critic, trying to tell his contemporaries how to be happier than most of them were.

To be sure, Butler's outlook was limited. Acute critic as he was of many Victorian values, he was very much a Victorian himself. His perception seldom travelled far from the Victorian middle-class home and family; and when it did his view of things became superficial at once. Nothing could well be more thoroughly *bourgeois* than his picture of Erewhonian society; and it is not for being *bourgeois* that Butler mocks at it, for the way of living that he implicitly holds up beside it is not less *bourgeois*. No one ever insisted more firmly than Butler on the Victorian virtue of having enough money to live on securely in a comfortable *bourgeois* way; and no one ever upheld more strongly the importance of prudence—surely the most *bourgeois* of all the virtues. Nor was Butler any less Victorian in his habit of taking the poor for granted—and for that matter the rich as well—and of simply postulating as his norm of good living a middle-class competence that was manifestly outside the reach of the vast majority of men. No doubt, in *The Way of All Flesh*, he made Ernest Pontifex do a number of most un-*bourgeois* things—marry a servant girl who had gone to the bad, keep an old clothes shop, and have his children brought up as bargees. But these were the aberrations of Ernest's wander-years: there was never any doubt of his returning in due course to the fold of a comfortable, *bourgeois* flat.

Of course, the *bourgeoisie* to which Samuel Butler belonged was not the *bourgeoisie* of commerce or industry, but that of the professional class. He was a child of the parsonage, and the grandchild of a schoolmaster who became a bishop ; and the class from which he came regarded itself as belonging to the unquestionable gentry, and took a high standard of education and traditional culture for granted. His class was not the new *bourgeoisie* which had been created by the Industrial Revolution, but rather that middle class which had existed in the eighteenth century and had come through the Industrial Revolution almost unchanged, with a lively sense of its own gentility as contrasted with the vulgarity of many of the new rich, and with a steady allegiance to the Church of England as the church to which all really decent people belonged. The two *bourgeoisies*, that of the old order and that of the new, were still for the most part unfused in Butler's boyhood ; and his associations were essentially with the old *bourgeoisie*, of the liberal professions, and not with the new *bourgeoisie* of trade and industry, though he and his family, like many others of his class, were by no means above making money by the appreciation of the value of land that was being built over as the towns spread, and had for the most part almost as keen an eye for the main chance as the new rich.

✓ Butler, of course, could not have satirised the Victorian middle classes half so well if he had not been one of them, in spirit as well as by upbringing in the sense just defined. He got all the more under their skin because he was criticising them from a standpoint which was fundamentally their own. Nothing is more revealing of this than his attitude to his own family. His comments on his upbringing, both in his stories and in his private letters and conversation, were

invariably scathing, and he said again and again quite unforgivable things about his relations. But for all that he never broke with them, or came near to doing so. He kept on going to stay with his father, whatever hard words he said about his visits : he kept on corresponding with his sister, however much he said he disliked her and accused her of disliking him. Fiercely as he attacked the Victorian family, its spell was upon him, and he could not even try to throw it off. Nor could he ever stop worrying about God, even when he had become fully convinced that God was not worrying about him. He had most of the Victorian obsessions, though he had many of them upside down. That, indeed, was how he enjoyed having things : witness his life-long delight in inverting a proverb or a text. "It is better to have loved and lost than never to have *lost* at all" gave him the keenest pleasure : his correspondence with Miss Savage, who shared his taste, is full of such *bon mots* : they stood happily on their heads at each other, whenever a chance offered. But to stand on one's head is not to shift one's ground ; and both Butler and his lady friend stayed always within the circle of Victorian respectability, even if they laughed at many of its values. They both preserved an immense consciousness of being "naughty," whenever they said anything that Mrs. Grundy would not have liked. Indeed, they both got no end of enjoyment, not only out of being, but even more out of feeling, "naughty." Butler said somewhere that whenever he went home to his family he had a sensation of being again a child ; but really he did not need to go home for that. The feeling of the naughty child stayed with him all his days, and gave his humour its peculiar quality. Butler was a *gamin* ; and his great bond with Miss Savage was that they were *gamins* together.

About twenty years ago I was asked to write on Samuel Butler for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. I agreed, and was sent a copy of the article which my contribution was to replace. This gave a brief enough account, but made some comment on most of Butler's books, including *Erewhon*, *The Fair Haven*, his Italian books, his Homeric studies and translations, his work on Shakespeare's Sonnets, and more particularly his four volumes on the theory of creative evolution. At the end it barely mentioned, without any comment, that he had written in addition a novel, *The Way of All Flesh*, which had been published in 1903, after his death. Plainly the writer of the article had no notion that Butler's posthumous novel was of any special interest or importance. Quite possibly, he had not read it; and if he had, presumably he had not liked it and had formed no conjecture that it was one of the greatest novels in the English language. It was to him no more than one item in Butler's bibliography, set down for the sake of completeness, but calling for no attention in assessing its author's place in the history of either literature or ideas.

No one, of course, could write like that about Butler now; for *The Way of All Flesh* has become a "classic" and holds a much securer place among the "classics" than *Erewhon*, which was mainly the source of such fame as he had, outside a small body of admirers, in his own day. All the books he published in his lifetime, with the single exception of *Erewhon*, were commercial failures: he made nothing, or a good deal less than nothing, out of them, and was mostly compelled to publish them at his own expense. Even *Erewhon*, though it was several times reprinted, was never near being a best-seller; and if its author had depended on writing for his livelihood, he would have sheerly starved.

Fortunately for himself and for posterity, Butler had private means, though they were for a long time straitened ; for he could assuredly never have written anything except just what he wanted to write, and the world would have been the poorer if he had been forced to make his living in some other way.

Actually, Butler did for a time earn his living in New Zealand as a sheep-farmer, before he settled down first to painting and then to writing ; and his first book, *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement*, was put together by his father out of his letters home. Canterbury was then a new settlement, just being opened up for sheep-farming, and Butler did well for himself. The yield of money was high, and he started with the advantage of having enough capital advanced by his father to buy and stock a farm, after he had learnt the trade. With this start, provided that he showed reasonable industry and competence, he had every chance to prosper ; and his property grew fast in value, besides yielding him an adequate income. But Butler had no intention of spending his life as a sheep-farmer ; and after five years in New Zealand he felt rich enough to sell out and return home. He had made a sum which, invested in good securities, seemed likely to yield him as much as he wanted for the kind of life he had it in mind to lead.

Butler's ambition at this time was to become a painter, and it was to painting that he gave his main attention for some time after his return to England in 1864. He took his art seriously, and from 1868 until 1876 was an occasional exhibitor at the Royal Academy and at other "shows." Some of his paintings have considerable, though none transcendent, merit ; but when he turned aside from painting to literature and published *Erewhon* in 1872 he still regarded his

writing as no more than a side-line. He had written squibs and essays at Cambridge as an undergraduate, and in New Zealand had contributed to *The Press*—a journal of some literary pretensions in the new colony, which rather prided itself on its culture : indeed, the first adumbration of *Erewhon*, later incorporated in *The Book of the Machines*, made its original appearance in this journal. This writing, however, had been merely occasional, and it took the success of *Erewhon* to turn him towards regular book-writing. *The Fair Haven*, which had its germ in an anonymous pamphlet which he had written some time before in the process of resolving his doubts about Christian evidences, appeared in 1873—the year after *Erewhon* ; and no sooner was that done than, encouraged by his faithful friend, Miss Savage, he set to work on the first draft of *The Way of All Flesh*. He was still, however, as his correspondence with Miss Savage shows, very doubtful of his capacity as an author. He was half uncertain of having enough to say, and half hesitant about how far he was prepared to go in outraging current conventions. Painting still seemed to him to be the first thing ; and the contest continued for some years before he began to feel sure that he could not both paint and write well, and, gripped by an idea that he could not let alone, gradually pushed painting aside and took to regular writing. Butler never ceased to paint, for his own satisfaction ; but after the middle 'seventies he painted only to please himself.

The Way of All Flesh was first written while he was in this transitional phase, and as he wrote it the chapters passed to and fro between him and Miss Savage, who admired them greatly and continually urged him on. He published nothing between *The Fair Haven* in 1873 and *Life and Habit*—his first book on creative evolution—in 1877 ; but in 1876 he

exhibited his last Royal Academy picture, and from that point he turned decisively towards writing. The series of books on evolution, in which the ideas put forward in *Life and Habit* were developed and his critics answered, diverted him for a time from story-telling, and he went back to his novel only in the early 'eighties, after he had written not only *Evolution New and Old* and *Unconscious Memory*, but also *Alps and Sanctuaries*, in which he first recorded his love of Italy and of primitive Italian art. Thereafter he worked again for a year or two over the manuscript of his novel, rewriting much of it; but presently he again laid it aside, having made up his mind against publication while many of the real people from whom he had drawn his characters were still alive. He said again and again that he meant to go back to it and to rewrite it all over again; but he never did. The text remained as he had left it in 1884, and was published, by the decision of his literary executor, the year after his death.

Butler's contemporaries, therefore, knew Butler as a story-teller only by means of *Erewhon*—to which he added *Erewhon Revisited* nearly thirty years later, the year before he died. They knew him mainly as "*Erewhon*" Butler, a curious, cranky writer who had produced, besides his successful satire, a strangely mixed collection of books, in which he almost always appeared to be saying something wilfully perverse. Butler was the man who had denied the story of the Resurrection—not, as David Strauss had done in his *Life of Jesus*, by attributing Christ's supposed reappearances after death to hallucination on the part of his disciples, but by denying the fact of Christ's death upon the Cross—or at any rate by denying that the death could be regarded as proved by the available evidence. Over and above this, Butler was the

man who had denied the current scientific doctrine of evolution by natural selection and, not being a trained scientist, had ventured to oppose to it a theory of creative evolution which he professed to have found in the superseded work of Erasmus Darwin (Charles Darwin's grandfather), of Buffon, and of Lamarck. Yet again, Butler was the man who, not being a professional scholar, had declared, not merely that the *Odyssey* was not composed by Homer, but that it had been written by a young woman, who had put herself into the poem as Nausicaa, the daughter of the Phaeacian king; and, not content with this, Butler was the man who had set out to prove that the *Odyssey* had been composed at Trapani, in Sicily, that its geography was mostly taken from the area round Trapani, and that most of Odysseus's wanderings consisted of a voyage round Sicily. Besides all this, Butler was the man who had put forward some very unorthodox views about Italian painting and about music—he even regarded Handel as the world's greatest composer, and had tried to compose music in Handel's style. He had written an unconvincing book about Shakespeare's sonnets—thereby ranging himself unquestionably among the cranks—and he had produced a very long, very dull, laudatory life of his grandfather, who had been first a headmaster and then a bishop—two callings for which elsewhere he had previously displayed only strong dislike. In short, Butler was a dabbler in many arts and sciences, and no authority upon any. It was conceded that, in *Erewhon*, he had shown for once a pretty wit; and no doubt there was cleverness, of a sort, in all his writings. But it was agreed that he was not to be taken seriously—the more so, because it was seldom clear whether he meant what he said seriously or not.