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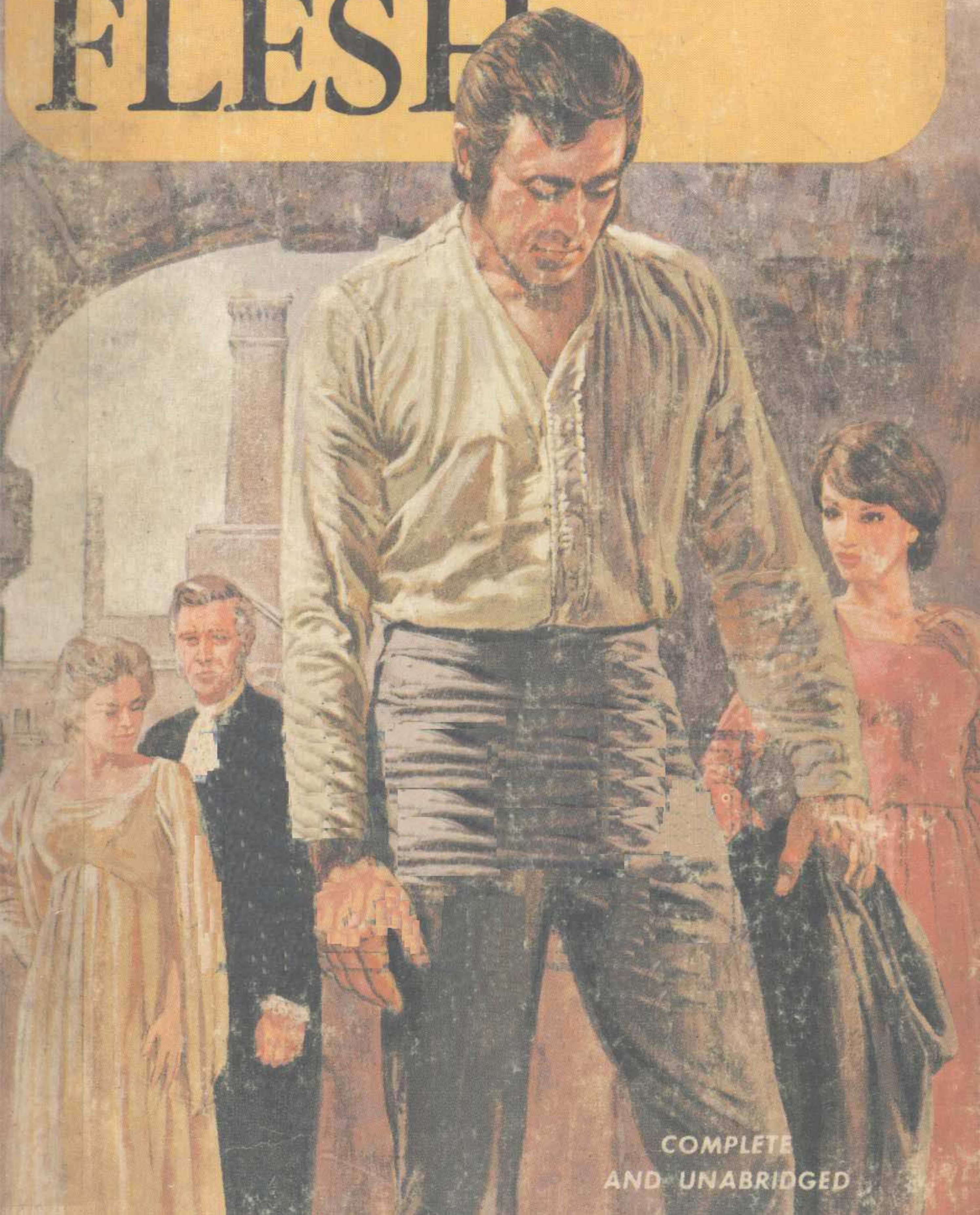
THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

SAMUEL BUTLER

Introduction by
O. H. Rudzik



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SAMUEL BUTLER

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET · NEW YORK 10022

An Airmont Classic

specially selected for the Airmont Library from the immortal literature of the world

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THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

SAMUEL BUTLER

INTRODUCTION

During his years of assiduously tilting at whatever Victorian orthodoxies aroused his irritation, Samuel Butler all too frequently found himself only the more irritated by the response his challenges met with. This was to find no response at all, to be summarily dismissed and increasingly ignored as a local variation of that famous sub-species of English intellectual life, the eccentric who, if too seriously energetic, becomes the crank. But it was as if he were determined to have the last word. What in his mature years had been to him a sideline—this novel that he worked at intermittently and with decreasing attention—was to appear in the year following his death and to provide not only a posthumous vindication for its author but his final indictment of the age that had persistently refused him a hearing.

Butler wrote only one novel if under that term can be included a book which presents not only the traditional narrative we may demand of such writing but much else—and, to its author, of much more import. First and most inescapably there was Butler himself in the story, so much so that he is at once the chief victim of what happens throughout the novel and, at the same time, the book's mature narrator who watches the young victimized Ernest grow closer

to him and to his own ideal state of self-possession. Two "heroes," so to speak, one suffering and developing through his pain, the other a constant standard and goal for the youth —but only one, obsessively single, villain, Ernest's father. Ernest's weak-willed mother, his hateful sister, the claustrophobic rectory are all in a sense reflections, extensions of the savagely satirized priest, Theobald. Butler's novel is a document of spiritual autobiography and, brooding over his own life in this direct fashion, Butler hoped to achieve his final emancipation through a massive cultural parricide.

When Butler, at the prompting of his close friend, Miss Eliza Savage, came to think of expressing his opinions and his elusive barbed wit through the medium of a fictionalized life, he had already achieved his own independence—spiritual, intellectual, and financial—though these were never to be as assured as his young hero's successes. Looking back from 1873* at his life, he could consider his own escapes and evasions of authority whether it was paternal, institutional, or intellectual. And these escapes are so directly given to his hero that the reader of the novel can detect a drop in emotional temperature and a substitute formality when Butler cannot vouch for Ernest in this most immediate way from his own experiences. Like Ernest, the young Samuel Butler endured a rectory genteely self-immured from its rustic parish; there was the tedium and surrogate paternalism of schoolmasters and there was the Church as the final trap. For Butler was to have continued the clerical line set first by his famous grandfather, Bishop Butler, and then furthered by his own father in a rather less glorious way.

At this point, Butler had enough of the folly Ernest still

* Butler worked at the book in three stages: in 1873-74, in 1878, and 1882-83, when he finally left it, worked over carefully and with much revision, but not completely finished. His literary executor, in fact, had to reconstruct chapters four and five from "various notes and sketches which remained among his papers." It was as if with Miss Savage's death, in 1885, the impetus to this form of self-expression waned. But Butler had carefully completed the crucial points of crisis in Ernest's escape. The fact of freedom he treated more summarily and with less engagement.

was to pursue. One dose of slum parish work on coming down from Cambridge was enough, even though the only alternative acceptable to his parents was a decorous disappearance to the distant colonies. Butler raised sheep for five years in New Zealand, having been given a start with some capital by his father. He surprised his father, and probably himself, by making out very well, and he returned to England in 1864 sufficiently well off to go his own ways. To begin with, he took up painting, earnestly but with an increasing realization of insufficient talent—or at least ever to have achieved the finish required for professional success. His only remarkable work in paint is the early, preconventional study of "Family Prayers" (1864), a primitively forceful group of people about to indulge in the family ceremony of evening praying.

This tradition of prayer and what it stood for was one of the first of Butler's targets. Ernest, with the enforced leisure of a prison sentence, notices the discrepancies among the gospels as to facts of Christ's historical presence. But he is still earnest enough to think himself possessed of a powerful argument against ancient institutions so evidently founded on error. Butler did not expect the Archbishop of Canterbury to resign the moment these facts were brought before him. Butler recognized the forcefulness of custom and cant and converted it to his own uses, had these discrepancies so foolishly defended by an imagined convert from disbelief that momentarily the argument of *The Fair Haven* (1873) by "the late John Pichard Owen . . . in Defence of the Miraculous Element in our Lord's Ministry upon Earth" was assumed to be on the side of the angels. A few had been misled and were accordingly indignant; many more had been bewildered by the Utopian fantasy of *Erewhon* the year before, where it was difficult to discover who the angels were. And then Butler seemed to write himself off completely by next attacking those whom the pious took to side with the apes.

Victorian Christianity and Victorian biology were at log-

gerheads. The apparent choice was to follow the dictates of faith or the demands of reason. Butler had dismissed the miracle of the resurrection; in his next book, he challenged Darwin's miracle, the discovery of evolution. Or so it seemed to most of Butler's contemporaries, a perverse decision to run with neither hares nor hounds. Butler defended himself as best he could in *Evolution, Old and New* (1879) by pointing to all of Darwin's predecessors, his grandfather Erasmus among others, and to how Darwin had, in fact, simplified an already existing tradition, thereby impoverishing its significance. Two motives emerge clearly from Butler's *Life and Habit* (1877) and connect it to what Butler had been getting at in *The Fair Haven.* All through his life Butler was to repeat his first feat of spiritual parricide, resisting the paternalistic menace wherever he seemed to see it. He left home, refused a family of his own, insisted God match his bachelorhood and that Darwin not be allowed to replace Him. What the Victorian rationalist gloried in—one thinks of numerous proud assertions by Darwin's self-appointed bulldog, Huxley—was divine absence. Butler was to insist on its total presence. *Luck or Cunning, As the Main Means of Organic Modification?* (1887), Butler's last statement in this evolutionary wrangle, shows the means to a new faith in its title. What Darwin had scrupulously (timidly or disingenuously, Butler considered it) avoided in restricting himself to phenomena randomly operating Butler declared to be purposive self-development. The Darwinians had wanted a new science and this was commitment enough for them; not so for Butler, who demanded faith and a proper haven—in the flesh. If it was to be either matter or mind in evolution and not the other, Butler's choice was for mind, broadened beyond any one individual, so as to become the dynamic force of life; the link was unconscious memory, uniting and evolving generations.

This is what gives the title of Butler's novel its full intellectual implication. Now, the overt satiric intent is clear: Ernest's follies are just that, not the inevitable lapses of the

natural man from grace into sin, but the inescapable consequences of ignorance. That he has been made ignorant deliberately and preserved in sanctimonious folly makes his society even more culpable. But under the anti-Victorianism so fond to the first readers of 1903, there lies the deeper thrust, more apt to the Biblical resonance of "the way of all flesh." Not just a satiric carnality but a serious reassessment of it—the flesh as it evolves through the generations, the rewards and burdens it imposes upon each stage of the Pontifex family. What Ernest must do, then, is not just see through the humbug around him and cure his own pitiful social ineptness; he must take up the task of evolving properly—sanely and healthily—where it had been botched by his grandfather and made all but hopeless by his father. He must kill his father in him, the pathetically crippled priest, and destroy the grandfather, the swaggering and complacent bully. Then he may realize, or at least recognize, the harmony of sense and mind and flesh in his memory of the first Pontifex we meet in the book, who lived and died with the sun. Not to be a priest but a bridge from the past is Ernest's task.

In the notebooks that Butler compulsively maintained, we can recognize how Ernest exorcized his author's demon: "I had to steal my own birthright. I stole it, and was bitterly punished. But I saved my soul alive." Butler suggests as the paradigm of all experience this painful self-discovery, emancipation, and growth; that it was in terms of the Victorian parsonage that this struggle had to occur intensified the bitterness and pushed it on to hatred. When Ernest comes to see the old Theobald as he is in his last days, he can achieve an accommodation with him and a kind of understanding of the pathos of both his parents. But none of this at the end of it all has the vital forcefulness of the earlier struggle: the hatred and hurt are far more convincing and authentic than their resolution and vindication. What then does Ernest lead to? What did Butler? A number of quixotic cultural crusades, rescuing unjustly neglected artists, attrib-

uting the Odyssey to Sicily and a young authoress, the explication of the emotional thread running through Shakespeare's sonnets, the praising of Handel. Not that these at all deserve the contempt they met with, but of both Butler and his hero, Ernest, the expectations are somehow greater. In both cases, the soul was saved alive but only by the final subterfuge of social and personal camouflage—or as one of Butler's best critics, P. N. Furbank,* stated it: "a resolute refusal of tragedy by a character naturally inclining to it." This is what, more than any Victorian polemics, brings *The Way of All Flesh* so very close to home.

O. H. Rudzik

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* P. N. Furbank, *Samuel Butler* (Cambridge, 1948) is admirable in its concentration and relevance. Clara Stillman, *Samuel Butler: a Mid-Victorian Modern* (New York, 1932) and Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Earnest Atheist* (1936) demonstrate the two possible extremes, the first in enthusiasm, the other in malice, that Butler can still evoke and yet elude.

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CHAPTER 1

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 what was called the Abbey Close. The house itself, embosomed 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 lip salve which was one of her special 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 was 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 frescoe 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 must 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 2

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 assuredly 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 recognize the obvious arose, she certainly refused to recognize it, until one snowy night in January the doctor was sent for with all urgent speed across the rough country roads. When he ar-

rived 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 counsellors 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 was—for I take it there is not much more solid success in this world than what fell to the lot of old Mr. and Mrs. Pontifex; it happened, however, that about the year 1780, when George was a boy of fifteen, a sister of Mrs. Pontifex's, who had married a Mr. Fairlie, came to pay a few days' visit at Paleham. Mr. Fairlie was a publisher, chiefly of religious works, and had an establishment in Paternoster Row; he had risen in life, and his wife had risen with him. No very close relations had been maintained between the sisters for some years, and I forget exactly how it came about that Mr. and Mrs. Fairlie were guests in the quiet but exceedingly comfortable house of their sister and brother-in-law; but for some reason or other the visit was paid, and little George soon succeeded in making his way into his uncle and aunt's good graces. A quick, intelligent boy with a good address, a sound constitution, and coming of respectable parents, has a potential value which a practised business man who has need of many subordinates is little likely to

overlook. Before his visit was over Mr. Fairlie proposed to the lad's father and mother that he should put him into his own business, at the same time promising that if the boy did well he should not want someone to bring him forward. Mrs. Pontifex had her son's interest too much at heart to refuse such an offer, so the matter was soon arranged, and about a fortnight after the Fairlies had left, George was sent up by coach to London, where he was met by his uncle and aunt, with whom it was arranged that he should live.

This was George's great start in life. He now wore more fashionable clothes than he had yet been accustomed to, and any little rusticity of gait or pronunciation which he had brought from Paleham was so quickly and completely lost that it was ere long impossible to detect that he had not been born and bred among people of what is commonly called education. The boy paid great attention to his work, and more than justified the favourable opinion which Mr. Fairlie had formed concerning him. Sometimes Mr. Fairlie would send him down to Paleham for a few days' holiday, and ere long his parents perceived that he had acquired an air and manner of talking different from any that he had taken with him from Paleham. They were proud of him, and soon fell into their proper places, resigning all appearance of a parental control, for which indeed there was no kind of necessity. In return, George was always kindly to them, and to the end of his life retained a more affectionate feeling towards his father and mother than I imagine him ever to have felt again for man, woman, or child.

George's visits to Paleham were never long, for the distance from London was under fifty miles and there was a direct coach, so that the journey was easy; there was not time, therefore, for the novelty to wear off either on the part of the young man or of his parents. George liked the fresh country air and green fields after the darkness to which he had been so long accustomed in the Paternoster Row, which then, as now, was a narrow, gloomy lane rather than a street. Independently of the pleasure of seeing the familiar faces of the farmers and villagers, he liked also being seen and being congratulated on growing up such a fine-looking and fortunate young fellow, for he was not the youth to hide his light under a bushel. His uncle had had him taught Latin and Greek of an evening; he had taken kindly to these languages and had rapidly and easily mastered what many boys take years in acquiring. I suppose his knowledge gave him a self-confidence which made itself felt whether he intended it or not; at any rate, he soon began to pose as a judge of literature, and from this to being a judge of art, architecture, music, and everything else the path was easy. Like his father, he knew the value of money, but he was at once more ostentatious and less liberal than his father; while yet a boy he was a thorough little man of the world, and did well rather upon principles which he had tested by personal experi-

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