The Way of All Flesh

by

Samuel Butler

"We know that all things work together for good to them that love God."
Rom. 8:28

Introduction by

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NOTE

SAMUEL BUTLER began to write *The Way of All Flesh* about the year 1872, and was engaged upon it intermittently until 1884. It is therefore, to a great extent, contemporaneous with *Life and Habit*, and may be taken as a practical illustration of the theory of heredity embodied in that book. He did not work at it after 1884, but for various reasons he postponed its publication. He was occupied in other ways, and he professed himself dissatisfied with it as a whole, and always intended to rewrite or at any rate to revise it. His death in 1902 prevented him from doing this, and on his death-bed he gave me clearly to understand that he wished it to be published in its present form. I found that the Ms. of the fourth and fifth chapters had disappeared, but by consulting and comparing various notes and sketches, which remained among his papers, I have been able to supply the missing chapters in a form which I believe does not differ materially from that which he finally adopted. With regard to the chronology of the events recorded, the reader will do well to bear in mind that the main body of the novel is supposed to have been written in the year 1867, and the last chapter added as a postscript in 1882.

R. A. STREATFEILD

INTRODUCTION

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MORTON DAUWEN ZABEL

THE WAY OF ALL FLESH is one of the milestones in the history of the English novel. This is a fact that could have astonished no one more than its author. He was not a professional novelist. He wrote only one novel and never published it in his lifetime. To find it claiming a rank with such other date-setting books as *Robinson Crusoe, Pamela, Tom Jones, Tristram Shandy, Pride and Prejudice, Waverley, The Pickwick Papers, Vanity Fair* and *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* must never have entered the calculations of his ironic mind. Yet this book, first issued in 1903, a year after Samuel Butler's death and about twenty after its completion, is not only the work by which he chiefly survives in literature but a book that marks as distinctly as any the point of division between the Victorian age and the twentieth century.

In its last pages its hero, Ernest Pontifex, having survived his ordeal to become a man of means and an author, says, in words that Butler certainly meant to apply to himself: "What can it matter to *me* whether people read my books or not? It may matter to *them*—but I have too much money to want more, and if the books have any stuff in

them it will work by-and-by. I do not know nor greatly care whether they are good or not. What opinion can any sane man form about his own work?" And a moment later Ernest's publisher says that "Mr. Pontifex is a *homo unius libri*"—a man of one book. Butler believed that he himself might be remembered as a man of one book, but he thought the book would be *Erewhon*, his satirical fantasy of 1872, the only one of the seventeen volumes he published in his lifetime that had found any degree of popularity or touched the imagination of his contemporaries. Today *Erewhon* is still remembered as one of the most effective pieces of social criticism the nineteenth century produced. And Butler is known for a number of other reasons—for his notebooks and his advocacy of note-keeping as an indispensable habit of authorship; for his battle with Darwin and the theory of Natural Selection; for several eccentric theories of his own, such as his notion that the *Odyssey* was written by a woman in Sicily or his unorthodox interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnets; for his championship of then neglected geniuses like Handel, Giovanni Bellini, Tabachetti and Gaudenzio Ferrari; for his promulgation of the ideas of "creative evolution," "life force," and "unconscious memory" that anticipated the future thought of Shaw, Bergson, Freud and Jung. But all these features of Butler's afterfame are known chiefly to specialists, to students of Victorian scientific controversy, to connoisseurs of English eccentricity, to social or literary historians. It is as the author of *The Way of All Flesh* that Butler claims his place in the pantheon of English literature and among the forces that have shaped the modern novel and the twentieth-century mind.

Its impact on the art and morality of our time is unmistakable. A recent critic, Mr. V. S. Pritchett, has called the book "one of the time-bombs of literature. One thinks of it lying in Butler's desk at Clifford's Inn for thirty years, waiting to blow up the Victorian family and with it the whole great pillared and balustraded edifice of the Victorian novel. The book Thackeray failed to write in *Pendennis* had at last been written. After Butler," he continues, "we look back upon a scene of devastation. A spiritual slum has been cleared. . . . Yes, says Samuel Butler, this was Heartbreak House. . . . Butler opposed a system and its myth not with another system but with the claims of the human personality. Against Victorianism he placed himself; himself with both feet on the ground, telescope to blind eye and in perverse self-possession, against people whose dreary will to power—and whose hold on spiritual and material property as well—had dried the sap of sense and life."

When *The Way of All Flesh* appeared in 1903 such an attack was particularly timely. It had, of course, long been anticipated. Butler took his clue and much of his method from his great forerunners in Victorian satire and criticism—from Dickens, Thackeray and Gilbert, from Mill, Spencer and George Eliot. His lineage as a satirist is a long one. It includes Fielding, Sterne, Byron, perhaps even Jane Austen—all the critics who impaled the cant, hypocrisy and sanctimony that form the dross of English habit and character. Though he has been regarded at different times as an eccentric, a pariah, an odd fish, a gadfly, a biological or spiritual "sport" in the English moral tradition, he is firmly a part of that tradition—part of its character and mentality, part of its divided temperament, part of the wit that com-

petes with its self-esteem and parochialism, never so effective as when he shows himself to contain its full ambivalence of sympathy and personality. Dickens, if a single name is to be emphasized, is his direct ancestor—the Dickens who both loved and pilloried the national character, who summed up in his lifework the whole riddled self-delusion and spiritual dry rot at work in the social body of the nineteenth century, and whose families—Pecksniffs, Chuzzlewits, Chadbands, Smallweeds, Gradgrinds, Dorrits, Barnacles, Veneerings, Wilfers—anticipate the Pontifexes. But neither Dickens nor Gilbert nor Gissing, not even the iconoclasts of the nineties, not even Shaw in his early plays or Wells in his early novels, had so fixed and isolated the virus of Victorian fatuity and the special organism of its most fruitful growth, the Victorian family, as Butler's novel did.

The Way of All Flesh classified this germ with the accuracy of a bacteriologist. The English social novel found the fresh impetus it was looking for. The Pontifexes became the case history of a lingering malady, coldly, remorselessly, infallibly diagnosed. The bourgeois ethos of the Victorian age had already died a dozen deaths, but it was still alive in the mentality of the English middle class. Not even the death of Queen Victoria herself in 1901 spelled its doom more finally than Butler's book did two years later. Slow at first to win a public hearing, it soon began to stamp its imprint on the work of the new century—on Shaw, Wells, Bennett, Forster, Beresford and D. H. Lawrence. "It drives one almost to despair of English literature," said Shaw in 1905, "when one sees so extraordinary a study of English life as Butler's posthumous *The*

Way of All Flesh making so little impression that when, some years later, I produce plays in which Butler's extraordinarily fresh, free and future-piercing suggestions have an obvious share, I am met with nothing but vague cacklings about Ibsen and Nietzsche. . . . Really, the English do not deserve to have great men." Bennett soon called it "one of the greatest novels of the world." Another young writer of the 1900's, then feeling his way toward authorship, was to recall years later why the author of *Erewhon* struck his mind so sharply. "For one thing," says E. M. Forster, "I have the sort of mind which likes to be taken unawares. The frontal full-dress presentation of an opinion often repels me, but if it be insidiously slipped in sidewise I may receive it, and Butler is a master of the oblique. Then, what he had to say was congenial, and I lapped it up. It was the food for which I was waiting." And when Shaw, at a later date, tried to explain why he considered Butler a man of genius, he said: "A man of genius is not a man who can do more things, or who knows more things, than ordinary men: there has never been a man of genius yet who has not been surpassed in both respects in his own generation by quite a large number of hopeless fools. He is simply a man who sees the importance of things. . . . Butler saw the importance of what he had hit on, and developed it into a message for his age."

What that message was has become, in the half-century since Butler's death, something simpler, perhaps, than Butler intended. This is doubtless the one unmistakable evidence of the element of genius in a talent whose authority is elsewhere debatable, or greatly confused by eccentric and perverse tendencies. One way of defining genius is by

its ability to make a certain idea or principle unmistakably its own, impossible to think of except in the special form it has discovered for it. Butler's is a case of this kind. He is celebrated as the demolisher of Victorian life and the mentality it produced. This reputation, based on his criticism of religion in *The Fair Haven,* on his satire on society in *Erewhon,* on his attack on the new orthodoxy of science in *Evolution Old and New, Life and Habit,* and *Luck or Cunning?,* but mainly on *The Way of All Flesh,* is valid to a point. It derives from the radical antinomianism in his make-up. It issues from a fundamental impulse in all his work. "I had to steal my own birthright," he once said. "I stole it and was bitterly punished. But I saved my soul alive." Yet the punishment, as Edmund Wilson has pointed out, "affected him more permanently than he knew. He had blasted Langar Rectory to eternity, but it had left upon him its blight. His soul was alive; but, as Bernard Shaw says, he had been maimed by his early training. Having begun as the bad boy of a pious family, he was never to outgrow that state of mind." Another recent writer on Butler, G. D. H. Cole, has corroborated this verdict:

> 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. . . . 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.

This states Butler's predicament well. It also indicates the complexity and special virtue of his case—the virtue of writing from deep inside the Victorian ethos—that gives his work its authenticity. The greatest satirists have written thus, from a profound involvement in their material. Butler was so involved. To see how and why, it is necessary to know something of his life, the more so since he transcribed that life so closely in his novel.

Butler was born in 1835 in the rectory of Langar in Nottinghamshire, the son of the Reverend Thomas Butler and his wife Fanny Worsley. Thomas Butler was the son of Dr. Samuel Butler, headmaster of Shrewsbury School, later to become Bishop of Lichfield, one of the most formidable pedagogues and divines of his day (and the subject of his grandson's one dull book, the biography the younger Samuel published in 1896 when, in an access of family conscience, he reversed the judgment on his grandfather that forms one of the most brilliant portraits in *The Way of All Flesh*, that of Ernest's grandfather George, the self-made, fatuously successful religious publisher). The family had progressed from the professional gentility of the eighteenth century, so deftly drawn in the first chapters of the novel with their picture of old Mr. Pontifex of Paleham, into the

clerical class of the nineteenth, custodian of English morality and education. Mr. Cole has pointed out that the Butlers' 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." This class prided itself on its associations with the liberal professions, with culture and religion in their official character. It was not above making money, and it made enough of it to provide the Butlers with substantial means, and a reverence for means that remained one of Butler's own deepest convictions. "Money losses are the hardest to bear of any by those who are old enough to comprehend them," says the narrator in the novel; and money is in the book not only a mode of access to the pleasantest things in life, but a refuge from vulgarity and indignity, a shield against ugliness and squalor, a weapon of tyranny, no doubt, but also an armor for the spirit.

But Langar Rectory was more than an abode of rank and respectability; it was a fortress of religious sanctimony, with the Reverend Thomas as its vested agent, a man of self-conceit and a bully, with an adoring wife to support his bullying discipline of their four children, Sam and Tom, Harriet and Mary. Of these Sam was the boy of sensitive nature, the child made to rebel. From the first he knew his father to be his enemy. "He never liked me, nor I him," he said many years later; "from my earliest recollections I

can call to mind no time when I did not fear him and dislike him. . . . 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." A regimen of lessons, cold authority, and almost daily beatings was varied only once, when the family went on a carriage journey through France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy, where Sam's love of nature, art and the South found its first flowering. The rest of his childhood was a thralldom that bred his earliest resolution—to escape.

At the age of ten he was sent to school at Allesley, and in 1848 to Shrewsbury School, where his grandfather's influence still prevailed and his shy, distrustful nature found a new kind of unhappiness. In 1854 he went to Cambridge and knew happiness for the first time. But further distresses awaited him there too. He came to grips with the orthodox theology in which he had been bred and with the challenge of the profession that had been conceived for him, the ministry of the Church. He discovered that he was a skeptic, that he could never follow his father and grandfather into the clergy, that what he really wanted to be was a painter. He also discovered a will of his own that was able to resist his parents' effort to get him to enter, in default of the ministry, a respectable calling like the law or teaching. The upshot of the struggle was that when he finished Cambridge he decided, on the strength of a personal capital of £270 and a promise of funds from his father, to emigrate to New Zealand and become a sheep farmer.

He went in 1859 at the age of twenty-three and stayed five years. He became an efficient farmer. He made money.

His health became robust. He delighted in the wild splendors of the southern wilderness (later to become the landscape of *Erewhon*). He found his first freedom of mind and spirit and returned to England a prosperous man, able at last to indulge his tastes and ambitions. He also returned with an incubus in the form of a friend, Charles Paine Pauli. Butler was fated to ill-advised or disappointing friendships all his life. They had their origin in his distracted and unresolved emotions, divided between romantic needs, uneasy suspicions, and a fear of giving himself freely that was dictated as much by social standards as by the laming hostilities of his childhood. Pauli's was the most ill-fated of these. It clung to him, leechlike, money-draining and nerve-sapping, for years.

In London Butler became a pupil at Heatherley's Art School, learned to paint, and before long was exhibiting at the Royal Academy. There he made the friendship of Eliza Mary Ann Savage, plain, lame, witty, and like himself a dissenter from Victorian smugness. She was the one woman to whom he ever responded with a genuine spiritual sympathy. She may have loved him, or she may not have. Butler could never love her, though he also found it impossible to live without her lively response and encouragement. She became his modest Egeria. It was she who spurred him to write *The Way of All Flesh*, contributed much to its growth and detail, provided the model for its one bright spirit, Ernest's Aunt Alethea, and when she died in 1885 Butler was filled with remorse at having been unable to give her the love and marriage he came to believe she wanted. Whether she really wanted them or not remains uncertain. The little lame lady who passed her courageous

life between a depressing home and various clubs and societies for emancipated women in which she served as secretary or manager remains the elusive sphinx of Butler's history. What is certain is that without her he would have missed his one fruitful friendship and perhaps the stimulus for the writing of his novel.

He had made a tentative start in authorship with *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement,* put together by his father out of his letters from New Zealand, in 1863. In New Zealand too he had begun to cultivate the literary talent he had first discovered in essays and exercises at Cambridge, by contributing to a local newspaper the fanciful sketches that produced the germ of the chapter of *Erewhon* called "The Book of the Machines." Now in London the germ developed and produced, in 1872, the book of *Erewhon,* and Butler found himself noticed as a writer. The next year he published *The Fair Haven,* a satire on the historicity of the Scriptures and an argument for the legendary, non-miraculous nature of Christianity. Having settled for the time being his accounts with his inherited religion, he plunged into the next of his lifelong battles, that against the mechanistic spirit of Darwinism, and produced his first book on "creative evolution," *Life and Habit,* in 1878. Here he set Buffon and Lamarck against Darwin and Huxley, whose hypotheses he believed to have "banished Mind from the Universe," creating a "soulless Determinism" and "a vacuum which Nature abhors." Thus in three books he set himself against the three great shibboleths of his age—material progress, religious orthodoxy and scientific determinism. He took on his shoulders the task and odium of defying the gods of Victorian England,

and made himself a pariah of contemporary culture.

Meanwhile, living in rooms in Clifford's Inn, and with the help of Pauli's cash-consuming parasitism, he was rapidly running through his capital. A banker friend, Henry Hoare, hastened this process by involving him in a series of wildcat promoting schemes that lost Butler most of his remaining fortune. He had to go to his father for help. These experiences left him with a dread of speculation and a passion for secure investments. His attempt to salvage what he could from Hoare's ventures took him to Canada on two trips in 1874 and 1875. There he recovered about £2000 (though he felt obliged to buy up the defaulted shares of those whom he had influenced to invest); and it was in Montreal that he profited by the colonial species of British cant when he discovered that a plaster cast of the "Discobolus" had been relegated to the basement of the local museum by the city's prudes, thus inspiring his "Psalm of Montreal," his best-known piece of invective. His financial troubles were over by 1886 when the inheritance due him from his grandfather's estate came to him. The final twenty years of his life were spent in Clifford's Inn; in frequent trips to France and Italy (his love of the mountains and the South was recorded in *Alps and Sanctuaries* in 1882); in indulging his love of music and Handel; in watching out the deaths of Miss Savage and Pauli; in satisfying his sexual needs clandestinely through a Frenchwoman, Mme. Lucie Dumas, who became his mistress; in finding a new friend and Boswell in Henry Festing Jones; in a brief romantic friendship with a young Swiss called Hans Faesch; and in writing, composing music, translating Homer, and publishing a sequel to *Erewhon* called *Ere-*

whon Revisited in 1901, until death overtook him at the age of sixty-six in June, 1902.

It was a life that carried to its end the scars that had been stamped on it from birth and early childhood. They show most in its cautions and privations, in its perversities of temperament, in its failure to love or give itself in love. In *The Way of All Flesh* he says that "Accidents which happen to a man before he is born, in the persons of his ancestors, will, if he remembers them at all, leave an indelible impression on him; they will have moulded his character so that, do what he will, it is hardly possible for him to escape their consequences. If a man is to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, he must do so, not only as a little child, but as a little embryo, or rather as a little zoosperm —and not only this, but as one that has come of zoosperms which have entered into the Kingdom of Heaven before him for many generations. Accidents which occur for the first time, and belong to the period since a man's last birth, are not, as a general rule, so permanent in their effects, though of course they may sometimes be so." Against this belief his sense of justice enabled him to see also the plight of parents: that, as Edmund Wilson has pointed out, "parents have not chosen their children any more than their children have chosen them and that the plight in which the situation places us may be equally cruel for both"—thus the chapter called "The World of the Unborn" in *Erewhon*. This double burden of hurt and guilt Butler carried through life. It came as close as it ever has among modern talents to inhibiting his gifts and to canceling the liberty and birthright he won for himself through his harsh ordeal.

He has been accused by some critics—by Malcolm Mug-

geridge for one, in the most scathing of the indictments drawn against him—of being a character essentially deformed, who read his personal liabilities back into the age and conditions that produced him, and of owning a nature dominated by defeatism and an egocentricity that could only hate. Some of this indictment is true. Butler never carried his resentment into a full intellectual or creative maturity. His books deny more effectively than they affirm. He never won, except in flashes, the vision of human suffering that has animated the greatest satirists, from Aristophanes and Juvenal to Swift and Voltaire. The hurt he suffered was so much a part of himself that he could never disown it, or disengage himself from its injuries. He treasured his wound and nursed his grievance. He held the world at arm's length because he feared it, and he protected himself with that world's own weapons—money, self-conceit, a protective suspicion of life. He felt himself a failure in friendship as much as in love, and he knew too much of great art—of Homer, Shakespeare, Handel and Bellini—to believe he had realized himself fully as an artist. He remained a Victorian to the end.

That much is admissible. Butler does not stand in the highest rank of English genius. He belongs to a more limited order of English talent—it appears also in such contemporaries as Beddoes, Lewis Carroll, Walter Pater and A. E. Housman—that shows an ingrowth of great gifts of imagination and spirit and that produces an art curtailed by doubt or eccentricity. But such talent has a strategy of its own. It often appears on the scene of history at opportune moments to seize what more vigorous men may miss —the canker at the heart of human nature or society that