

SOME ASPECTS OF SAMUEL BUTLER.

BY M. JOURDAIN.

SAMUEL BUTLER, who was born in 1835 and died in 1902, has only been a name for the last few years among the general public. He owes this introduction mainly to his two literary "god-fathers," Mr. Francis Darwin¹ and Mr. Bernard Shaw. The latter in one of his polemical prefaces brings Butler to the fore in a manner which sent hundreds of readers to the *Way of all Flesh*. To read in his own department that the late Samuel Butler was the greatest English writer of the latter half of the nineteenth century was a shock to the public already conquered by Shaw, and to whom the name of Butler suggested vaguely the overdusted author of the *Analogy*, or of *Hudibras*. Shaw's few words are telling. "It drives one almost to despair of English literature," he writes, "when one sees so extraordinary a study of English life as Butler's posthumous *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 and am only too thankful they are not about Alfred de Musset and Georges Sand. Really, the English do not deserve to have great men. They allowed Butler to die practically unnoticed."

To this admission we must add that of his other "godfather," Mr. Francis Darwin, who in his presidential address at the British Association in 1908, spoke of Butler's entertaining book *Life and Habit*; and Professor Bateson's mention of him in 1909² as "the most brilliant and by far the most interesting of Darwin's opponents, whose works are at length emerging from oblivion."

These utterances aroused the interest which was accumulating

¹ Now Sir Francis Darwin.

² *Darwin and Modern Science*, 1909.

for Butler after his death, and he has begun to be exalted with a rapidity that he himself, though secure of his ultimate hearing, could hardly have foreseen. At the time of his death the leading articles concluded that it was a pity so talented a man had done no more; as if they had been writing the obituary notice of Lord Acton, who died at the same moment. On the whole, the notices of Lord Acton are the longer. But the difficulty in truth is that Butler had done so much that before his death it was possible for a person not unduly ignorant to be unaware that the author of *Erechon* had moved in theological polemics and in Shakespearian, Homeric and scientific criticism; that he had attacked some problems of art, was a composer of music and verse, and a fairly well-known exhibitor in the Royal Academy. And all this without giving the impression of dilettantism and superficiality. Oscar Wilde says somewhere that to know the vintage and quality of a wine one need not drink the whole cask. Now, it is necessary to drink the whole cask in the case of Butler, and to know not only his complete work but his life, for the simple reason that he is one of the most autobiographical of authors, and his best book is but a disguised autobiography.

The main facts of this life are sufficiently well known, and no reader of *The Way of all Flesh* is surprised that Butler was the son of a clergyman and grandson of a bishop. He was born at his father's rectory of Langar in Nottinghamshire, in 1835. He went from Shrewsbury School to St. John's College, Cambridge, where he graduated as twelfth in the Classical Tripos in 1858. After Cambridge he was impelled into the priestly path from without rather than within, and went so far as to become a lay reader. The path was not of his choosing, and in the autumn of 1859 he emigrated to New Zealand, where he was successful in his sheep run and even more so in its sale at a fortunate moment. He returned to England and set himself to school as a painter. Between 1865 and 1870 he hardly wrote anything, being, as he says in the 1901 preface to *Erechon*, "hopeful of attaining that success as a painter which it has not been vouchsafed me to attain." His literary work practically begins with *Erechon*.

As he says in his preface, the substance of certain chapters was written between 1863 and 1865. In 1871 the book was written. On its appearance in March 1872 it had an unlooked-for success which he attributed mainly to two early favorable reviews, the first in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the second in the *Spectator*. There was also another cause. Butler was "complaining once to a friend that

though *Erewhon* had met with such a warm reception my subsequent books had been all of them practically still-born. He said: 'You forget one charm that *Erewhon* had, but which none of your other books have.' I asked what, and was answered: 'The sound of a new voice and of an unknown voice.'" The unknown voice had a success unexpected by George Meredith, who was then reader to Chapman and Hall, and who advised its rejection as "a philosophical work little likely to be popular with a large circle of readers." It is curious that this one successful book did not do more to create a taste for Butler's work; for *Erewhon* contains many of his "finds," or recurrent ideas, such as the analogy of crime and disease, the preference for physical over moral health, the theory of the transmission of habit and memory from one generation to another, and the condemnation of certain forms of cant.

It is characteristic of Butler that his next book, published anonymously like *Erewhon*, was also an exercise in irony. *The Fair Haven*, which appeared in 1873, and which declared itself as "a defence of the miraculous element in our Lord's ministry upon earth, both as against rationalist impugnors and certain orthodox defenders," is an instance of the sober and weighty irony of which Swift alone among his predecessors had the secret. A well-known religious paper in a long review expressed itself grateful for Butler's defence and his scattering of the unorthodox, and this review was one of his most treasured possessions. The mystification disturbed the uncritical, and Butler won the reputation of a malign person to be feared by those whose gift for irony was undeveloped.

The next batch of books was written about the "finds" which Butler himself would seem to have considered the most important of all those ideas which he picked up like "sovereigns that were lying about the street." One of the most original is the perception that "personal identity cannot be denied between parents and offspring without at the same time denying it between the different ages, and hence moments, in the life of the individual—and as a corollary to this the ascription of the phenomena of heredity to the same source as those of memory."

As Hering³ says: "Between the *me* of to-day and the *me* of yesterday lie night and sleep, abysses of unconsciousness; nor is there any bridge but memory with which to span them." And in the same way he claims that the abyss between two generations is

³ Cf. *On Memory as a General Function of Organised Matter*, Chicago, 1895; Mach, *Contributions to the Analysis of the Sensations*, Chicago, 1897, page 36.

bridged by the unconscious memory that resides in the germ cells. Butler has previously worked out the view that "we are one person with our ancestors" in *Life and Habit* (1877) written in ignorance of Hering's work, and this was the first and undoubtedly the most important of his writings on evolution.

With Butler the leading motive in one book is repeated in its contemporaries and successors, and *The Way of all Flesh* has much in common with *Life and Habit*, for though the publication of *The Way* was for obvious reasons deferred until after his death, it was written about 1872 and touched and retouched until 1884, so that it is to a great extent contemporaneous with *Life and Habit*. The incentive to write the book was given by Butler's acquaintance with Miss Savage, who is the Althea of *The Way*. The book has the freshness often absent from the novel of the professed novelist, the sharp taste of sincere autobiography. The history of Ernest Pontifex, coincident with Samuel Butler's at more than one point, is told without false or external accentuation, without stage trickery and contrivances. At some junctures where the satire seems to drop to caricature, Butler was often giving a transcript of his experience. It is a fantasia on the filial relationship, a lesson for parents, and it would seem that Butler was the only man of his generation who saw the unnecessary glooms and deceptions of the English upper and middle-class households.

Unlike Ernest Pontifex, Butler cannot be described as a man of one book with many creditable failures to set against the successful *Erewhon*, but like him he can be said to be "the exact likeness of Othello, but with a difference—he hates not wisely but too well." *The Way* was Butler's only venture into the novel of human interest, as apart from the Utopian fantasies of the two *Erewhons*. The line of argument he took up in *Life and Habit* against the rigid application of natural selection he now proceeded to complete in his *Evolution, Old and New* (1879), in which he "tidied up the earlier history of Evolution," *Unconscious Memory* (1880), *Luck and Cunning* (1886), and *The Deadlock in Darwinism* (1890)—a revolt against what he considered the banishment of mind from the universe.

A little later than the bulk of his scientific work come his contributions to art criticism, in which he opened the eyes of many people to the originality of the work of Gaudenzio Ferrari and Tabacchetti at Varallo,⁴ where he stayed repeatedly from 1871 to 1901. As might be expected, his treatment of the sacrosanct common-

⁴ In *Ex Foto* (1888).

places of traditional art criticism is as irreverent as Hogarth's way with the "dark masters." "As for the old masters, the better plan," Butler writes, "would be never to look at one of them and to consign Raffaele along with Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Antoninus, Dante, Goethe and two others, neither of them Englishmen, to limbo as the Seven Humbugs of Christendom." Any reader of Butler may fill up the two discreet vacancies for himself, the only problem being that there are only two seats to fill.

The traditional commonplaces of art criticisms are amusingly gathered upon his George Pontifex in *The Way of all Flesh*, who goes upon a continental grand tour "having made up his mind to admire only what he thought it would be creditable in him to admire, to look at nature and art only through the spectacles that had been handed down to him by generation after generation of prigs and impostors." As a consequence, conventional ecstasies, genteel paroxysms which "it is interesting to compare with the rhapsodies of critics in our own times." "Not long ago a much esteemed writer informed the world that he felt disposed to cry out with delight before a figure by Michael Angelo. I wonder whether he would feel 'disposed to cry out with delight' before a real Michael Angelo if the critics had declared it was not genuine, or before a reputed Michael Angelo which was really by somebody else? But I suppose a prig with more money than brains was much the same sixty or seventy years ago as he is now."

It may be added that Butler applied the same spirit in questioning the "dark masters" in music and classic literature, and that he questioned the reputation of Mendelssohn and Beethoven, Virgil and the Greek tragedians. The list of his preferences and detestations is significant of Butler's own outfit. One sees what he found or wished to find in the arts: his distaste for the academical in literature, the "lengths of satin" of Tennyson, the languid work of Walter Pater, the "Wardour Street English," as he calls it, of a well-known translation of Homer. It was natural that with this criterion Butler was inclined to set Tabachetti's fresh and unacademic work higher than it is generally placed, among the very highest achievements of plastic art.

In 1886 the death of Butler's father removed his financial difficulties, and he now spent most summers abroad, returning to his chambers in Clifford's Inn. During this period he studied music with his friend Mr. Festing Jones; and between 1886 and 1902 he brought out such disparate books as *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, the dignified and dull biography of his grandfather and namesake

Samuel Butler, bishop of Lichfield and Coventry,⁵ an excursion into the problem of Shakespeare's Sonnets,⁶ and *Erewhon Revisited*—his last and most rapidly written book, composed between November 1900 and the end of April in the following year. Failing health may have had something to do with the relative weakness of the sequel, for he was not well when he set out for Sicily in the spring of 1902. He died on June 18 of that year. In returning to his last book for the latest expression of his thought on the religious questions he had so often raised, we have a clear statement in his preface.

"I forget when, but not very long after I had published *Erewhon* in 1872, it occurred to me to ask myself what course events in *Erewhon* would probably take after Mr. Higgs. . . . had made his escape. Given a people in the conditions supposed to exist in *Erewhon*, and given the apparently miraculous ascent of a remarkable stranger into the heavens with an earthly bride—what would be the effect on people generally? It was not till the early winter of 1900-1, as nearly as may be thirty years after the date of Higg's escape, that I found time to deal with the question above stated. . . . Now the development of all new religions follows much the same general course. In all cases the times are more or less out of joint—older faiths are losing their hold upon the masses. At such times, let a personality appear, strong in itself and made to appear still stronger by association with some supposed 'transcendent' miracle, and it will be easy to raise a 'Lo here!' that will attract many followers. If there be a single great and apparently well-authenticated miracle, others will accrete round it; then in all religions that have so originated there will follow temples, priests, rites, sincere believers, and unscrupulous exploiters of public credulity." Again in this preface he tells us that he "never ceased to profess himself a member of the more advanced wing of the English Broad Church. What those who belong to the wing believe I believe. What they reject, I reject." He rejects the letter⁷ and accepts the spirit, as he had said in his earlier *Ex Voto*:

⁵ *Life of Samuel Butler, Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry* (1896).

⁶ *Shakespeare's Sonnets Reconsidered* (1899). This is not a particularly interesting work of Butler's, and his theory of the "Mr. W. H." is not included by him among his own list of his important "finds."

⁷ This has been questioned. Mr. Salter writes in *Essays on Two Moderns*: "How far the book was intended to cast a doubt on any particular incident of the Christian story may be questioned; Butler himself strenuously denied any such intention. But the resemblances are in some cases too close to be accidental, and it seems most probable to suppose that, desiring to show how easily among an unsophisticated and imaginative people the supernatural and miraculous cluster round matter-of-fact occurrences, he chose to use illustra-

"Who in these days but the advocates whose paid profession it is to maintain the existing order and those whom custom and vested interests hold enthralled, accepts the letter of Christianity more than he accepts the letter of Oriental exaggerated phraseology? Who, on the other hand, that need be reckoned with, denies the eternal underlying verity that there is an omnipresent unknown Something for which Mind, Spirit, or God is, as Professor Mivart has well said, 'the least misleading' expression? Who doubts that this Mind or God is immanent throughout the whole universe, sustaining it, guiding it, living in it, he in it and it in him. I heard," he adds, "of one not long since who said he had been an atheist this ten years, and added 'Thank God.'"

That disturbing close to a passage in his most serious mood is one cause of Butler's beating the air, as far as his own generation was concerned. His manner suggested the convenient conclusion that he was an eccentric, "a Columbus of mare's nests, whose claim to fame, apart from his first book, rested on the discovery that Darwin was an imposter, and that Homer was a woman."⁸ He broke with the tradition of seriousness in controversy, in which his books are rather confessions and conversations. Even when he backs himself against specialists, his style has the unlabored, unaffected note which has become not unusual to-day, but which must have surprised his contemporaries. In the preface to his *Luck or Cunning?*, for instance, he assured the world that he believed his theories to be as important as theories can be which do not involve money or bodily inconvenience,—an assurance which the world was not wont to receive from the theorist. He troubled the church that was not broad by his mystifications and his paradoxes, and his jests had a sharper and more intimate edge from his position as the son and grandson of augurs, so that two widely differing classes considered him as hardly serious. But this was a mistaken estimate. There is no better test of an author's seriousness, whatever be his manner, than his consistency with his expressed self, the recurrence of his leading ideas, and, if this be applied to Butler, it will be found that he is the exact opposite of the character general contemporary opinion assigned to him, and that the author of the *Fair Haven* had some reason to prefix to *Erewhon Revisited* the motto from Homer:

"Him do I hate even as I hate Hell fire
Who says one thing, and hides another in his heart."

tions which would be familiar to all his readers, without necessarily intending an attack on the Christian faith as such."

⁸ Desmond Macarthy, in *Independent Review*, Sept., 1904.