THE AUTHORESS OF THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

SAMUEL BUTLER: A MEMOIR. *By Henry Festing Jones. 12mo. Two volumes. 979 pages. The Macmillan Company. New York.*

MISS SAVAGE becomes an obsession. Some years ago when I was studying Butler for my critical work I had to fight hard to ward her off, because I knew nothing about her and Mr. Festing Jones wanted her for this monument which he has raised to the memory of his friend. She obsessed Butler to the extent of making him believe that a woman wrote Homer, and she has also obsessed myself to the point of making me give the above absurd title to this review. She was malicious, she admitted and gloried in her habit of lying, but she was feminine and feline, detestable and adorable. Mr. Festing Jones simply cannot trust himself to speak of her, and has clearly been at some pains to avoid her obsessive power. Butler was her victim, helpless under her hands as she dug out of him the obstinate humour which was necessary for the completion of her existence, perhaps in order to make the sharpness of her own wit endurable. Butler, on the other hand, owed her just as much because he could not live without obsessions, and at the time she turned up he was bored almost to the point of extinction with his beloved obsession of his father. Miss Savage's letters explain the strange power that came into this odd little man in middle life and left him after her death. The correspondence of these two is like that of Abelard and Heloise, only in this instance the protagonists are two queer little middle-aged persons in late-Victorian London.

Butler had been driven as far as New Zealand by the obsession of his father and he returned to England when he thought Darwin, by upsetting the Anglican faith, had made that country safe for him. He returned with an incubus, an impecunious friend whom he had undertaken to set on his feet. To this friend he gave a quarter of his income, partly out of absurd generosity and partly to avoid being like his father, who had effectively tied him up by making a reversion contingent. The Butlers, father and son, squabbled for years over money, and both thoroughly enjoyed it. They were nineteenth

century Englishmen, wretched in the processes of industrial revolution, and taking it out of each other in consequence. The English have a pig-headed capacity of endurance for which they are not as a rule given sufficient credit. They will make a mess of things and then just hang on stubbornly until life re-asserts itself and the mess becomes a joke. To Samuel Butler that kind of joke was the all-important thing in life, and therefore he had no use for success or prosperity, which led nowhere. The joke was the divine thing, the intimation of immortality, and therefore he could not endure people like his father or Charles Darwin or Miss Savage, who took life and themselves seriously. Of the three Miss Savage was the most really serious and therefore his relationship with her was maintained for the most part through correspondence. He was afraid of her just as he was afraid of his father and Charles Darwin, with an intellectual rather than a personal fear.

These three obsessions made up his real life, which he decorated rather than enriched with friendships. Let us consider them in their order. Butler, senior, was one of your Hell-fire Christians, so enamoured of Hell that they turn this life into a foretaste of it: no room for the divine joke *there*. Hence Butler's horror of his father and his fanatical struggle with him. Fear of Hell-fire, however, had kept the English fairly decent—and for the ordinary purposes of life Butler asked no more. Then came the publication of The Origin of Species, and the young Samuel saw that his father was dished. The menace of Hell-fire had lost its validity, because the theory of evolution demonstrated that there was no such place. Hurrah! then, for Darwin and Huxley who would at last make room in civilized life for the divine joke. Butler in New Zealand felt that he could return to civilization, and did so, only to find to his disgust that there was less room for the divine joke than ever because to the solemnity of the Bishops had been added that of the scientists. Worse than that, Darwin by letting loose such phrases as the survival of the fittest and insisting upon the mindlessness of evolution, had authorized the ruthlessness of the industrial revolution as it gathered momentum for its work of world-wide devastation. A materialistic philosophy had been evolved which for sheer humbug knocked Anglican and Hell-fire Christianity into a cocked hat. The tyranny of machines which Butler had thought of in New Zealand as a whimsy was in England rapidly becoming the most appalling reality. He saw the danger to his beloved joke and did what he

could to defend it by attacking his old enemy, Anglican Christianity. This new obsession was forcing out the old one: Charles Darwin stepped into the place hitherto occupied by his father. Erewhon did something, gave him at least some satisfaction but not enough. A Darwinian world would be too frightful to live in because no one would be able to laugh in it, and no one need be kind any more or even decent. A letter from Darwin to Butler is illuminating:

"Have you ever read Huxley's article or articles on 'Animal Automatism,' two or three years ago in The Contemporary? He tried to show that consciousness was something superadded to nervous mechanism, like the striking of a clock is added to the ordinary going parts. I mean that the consciousness as we know it has nothing to do with the act, which is a question of nerve-machinery.

"You seem to me to have gone on the reverse tack—instead of reducing consciousness to a passive looker-on, you have, I think, made consciousness into an active cause, a producer of energy."

That was precisely what Butler had done, though he was too excited and too much in earnest to be able to say so clearly. He felt more than he saw of the implications of the elevation of Darwin's scientific statement into a philosophy. He was brave enough to lose his head—in order to find it; and, refusing to side with either the Anglicans or the Darwinians, pleased no one and was left severely alone as a crank, which he was, though a crank blessed with a sense of humour and a belief that life knew its business better than men or the society of men did theirs. He was a crank in that he could not be fair to Darwin, nor to himself. In the intense excitement of seeing the world go slowly mad while he remained sane, he lost all sense of self-preservation and was inevitably forced into ruin. The work he had set himself in the writing of Life and Habit and its successors was work for which no one would pay him, and he could do no other. This was too absorbing and too urgent. For a moment he lost his sense of humour and was betrayed into the scandal of insulting Darwin, who, poor old gentleman, could not make out what this surprising adversary was driving at. Butler himself was not too clear about it. He could make his meaning clear but not the implications of his meaning. He had humour and common sense but no imagination, for to him that had meant Hell-fire and all that his father had stood for. A shocking dilemma this: if only Butler

had been a humourless man like Ruskin or Carlyle or William Morris! But the thing he was fighting for was precisely the intuition of the divine joke of the universe which is called the sense of humour, and it made Butler, one of the most insighted men of his time, a Conservative. The strain was too great: he knew that what he had tried to do was all-important, but he could not find acceptance from the world or deliverance from his own difficulties. He had tried to become a painter and was not a good painter, and in writing he remained an amateur. The professionals could overlook him because he could not—or would not—learn their jargon.

Life, with delightful sense of humour, presented him with a third obsession, the lady, Miss Eliza Mary Ann Savage, who turned him into a writer of potent influence, and of whom he wrote, as in his old age he turned it all over in his whimsical brain, the following sonnet:

"She was too kind, wooed too persistently,
Wrote moving letters to me day by day:
The more she wrote, the more unmoved was I.
The more she gave, the less could I repay.
Therefore I grieve not that I was not loved,
But that, being loved, I could not love again.
I liked: but like and love are far removed:
Hard though I tried to love I tried in vain,
For she was plain and lame and fat and short
Forty and over-kind. Hence it befell
That, though I loved her in a certain sort,
Yet did I love too wisely but not well.
Ah! Had she been more beauteous or less kind
She might have found me of another mind."

He was always most obstinately unromantic and unimaginative or he would have known that she had found the artist in him and could not rest until she had brought it to light and life. How much of what is commonly known as love was mixed with this desire in her it is possible only to guess: in all likelihood she wanted to discover in the odd shy little man what he would not—or could not—discover for himself, the sensitive, quick perception of the flame of life which had been almost numbed by Butler senior, who so lamentably confused the flame of life with the flame of Hell. In one letter of Miss Savage's there is an almost gasping eagerness that

the real quality in Butler might be released by the disaster that had overtaken him, but it never was. For her the relationship was a quick, intense drama, so vivid indeed that the pressure of it sometimes made her wit almost rise into a shrill scream to Butler: "Can't you see what you are? Can't you see what you are?" Butler could not but feel that, and with male obtuseness thought she was exclaiming in every nerve: "Can't you see what you are *to me?*" Nothing of the kind: she knew herself. She had only beauty of soul, that beauty which is active in its love, and that she gave in full measure, as Butler well knew after she had died. He enjoyed the joke of it, of course, that the only possible wife life had ever presented him with was impossible. Yet she prevailed and married him by letter and hen-pecked him into being artist enough to write The Way of All Flesh.

From their own words, Mr. Festing Jones has created his wonderful story, curious and delightful in its perfection, charming in its surrounding detail. After Miss Savage's death Butler relapsed into the eighteenth century, giving up the nineteenth as hopeless. His father died and left him plenty of money so that he could become the rich, eccentric, travelling English milord, almost, like so many Englishmen of strong character, a person out of fiction, more fit to live with Parson Adams and Squire Western than with the rather grubby, savourless people who were beginning to throng London. He attached Mr. Jones to himself, and Alfred, and escaped into Italy and Sicily where he could still find people who, as he said, lived "under grace and not under the law"—and he was happy. Probably he was never anything else even during the dreadful years when he lived through both a mental and a financial crisis. He understood happiness: that is a rare faculty. The God he imagined was a happy God and Him he served all his days. He enjoyed his isolation and his notoriety, but most of all he enjoyed the appreciation that came to him at last, taking a childish pleasure in everything that was said and written about him. Possibly he is having a wonderful time pestering Handel and Homer and Shakespeare with posers about their work, or telling them what a wonderful person Miss Eliza Mary Ann Savage was. He would loathe the comparison, and I am sure Mr. Jones will detest it; but, being romantic, I like to think of them as consorting with Abelard and Heloise, who will perfectly understand all that went on inside these two dowdy, odd, ill-assorted but immortal little people.—GILBERT CANNAN