

**GOSSE**  
**EDMUND**

ASPECTS AND  
IMPRESSIONS

Edmund Gosse

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# Edmund Gosse

## Aspects and Impressions

GEORGE ELIOT

IN and after 1876, when I was in the habit of walking from the north-west of London towards Whitehall, I met several times, driven slowly homewards, a victoria which contained a strange pair in whose appearance I took a violent interest. The man, prematurely ageing, was hirsute, rugged, satyr-like, gazing vivaciously to left and right; this was George Henry Lewes. His companion was a large, thickset sybil, dreamy and immobile, whose massive features, somewhat grim when seen in profile, were incongruously bordered by a hat, always in the height of the Paris fashion, which in those days commonly included an immense ostrich feather; this was George Eliot. The contrast between the solemnity of the face and the frivolity of the headgear had something pathetic and provincial about it.

All this I mention, for what trifling value it may have, as a purely external impression, since I never had the honour of speaking to the lady or to Lewes. We had, my wife and I, common friends in the gifted family of Simcox – Edith Simcox (who wrote ingeniously and learnedly under the pen-name of H. Lawrenny) being an intimate in the household at the Priory. Thither, indeed, I was vaguely invited, by word of mouth, to make my appearance one Sunday, George Eliot having read some pages of mine with indulgence. But I was shy, and yet should probably have obeyed the summons but for an event which nobody foresaw. On the 18th of December, 1880, I was present at a concert given, I think, in the Langham Hall, where I sat just behind Mrs. Cross, as she had then become. It was chilly in the concert-room, and I watched George Eliot, in manifest discomfort, drawing up and tightening round her shoulders a white wool shawl. Four days later she was dead, and I was sorry that I had never made my bow to her.

Her death caused a great sensation, for she had ruled the wide and flourishing province of English prose fiction for ten years, since the death of Dickens. Though she had a vast company of competitors, she did not suffer through that period from the rivalry of one writer of her own class. If the Brontës had lived, or Mrs. Gaskell, the case might have been different, for George Eliot had neither the passion of *Jane Eyre* nor the perfection of *Cranford*, but they were gone before we lost Dickens, and so was Thackeray, who died while *Romola* was appearing. Charles Kingsley, whose *Westward Ho!* had just preceded her first appearance, had unluckily turned into other and less congenial paths. Charles Reade, whose *It is Never Too Late to Mend* (1856) had been her harbinger, scarcely maintained his position as her rival. Anthony Trollope, excellent craftsman as he was, remained persistently and sensibly at a lower intellectual level. Hence the field was free for George Eliot, who, without haste or hesitation, built up slowly such a reputation as no one in her own time could approach.

The gay world, which forgets everything, has forgotten what a solemn, what a portentous thing was the contemporary fame of George Eliot. It was supported by the serious thinkers of the day, by the people who despised mere novels, but regarded her writings as contributions to philosophical literature. On the solitary occasion when I sat in company with Herbert Spencer on the committee of the London Library he expressed a strong objection to the purchase of fiction, and wished that for the London Library no novels should be bought, "except, of course, those of George Eliot." While she lived, critics compared her with Goethe, but to the disadvantage of the sage of Weimar. People who started controversies about evolutionism, a favourite Victorian pastime, bowed low at the mention of her name, and her own strong good sense alone prevented her from being made the object of a sort of priggish idolatry. A big-wig of that day remarked that "in problems of life and thought which baffled Shakespeare her touch was unfailing." For Lord Acton at her death "the sun had gone out," and that exceedingly dogmatic historian observed, *ex cathedra*, that no writer had "ever lived who

had anything like her power of manifold but disinterested and impartial sympathy. If Sophocles or Cervantes had lived in the light of our culture, if Dante had prospered like Manzoni, George Eliot might have had a rival." It is very dangerous to write like that. A reaction is sure to follow, and in the case of this novelist, so modest and strenuous herself, but so ridiculously overpraised by her friends, it came with remarkable celerity.

The worship of an intellectual circle of admirers, reverberating upon a dazzled and genuinely interested public, was not, however, even in its palmiest days, quite unanimous. There were other strains of thought and feeling making way, and other prophets were abroad. Robert Browning, though an optimist, and too polite a man to oppose George Eliot publicly, was impatient of her oracular manner. There was a struggle, not much perceived on the surface of the reviews, between her faithful worshippers and the new school of writers vaguely called pre-Raphaelite. She loved Matthew Arnold's poetry, and in that, as in so much else, she was wiser and more clairvoyant than most of the people who surrounded her, but Arnold preserved an attitude of reserve with regard to her later novels. She found nothing to praise or to attract her interest in the books of George Meredith; on the other hand, Coventry Patmore, with his customary amusing violence, voted her novels "sensational and improper." To D. G. Rossetti they were "vulgarity personified," and his brother defined them as "commonplace tempering the stuck-up." Swinburne repudiated *Romola* with vigour as "absolutely false." I dare say that from several of these her great contemporaries less harsh estimates of her work might be culled, but I quote these to show that even at the height of her fame she was not quite unchallenged.

She was herself, it is impossible to deny, responsible for a good deal of the tarnish which spread over the gold of her reputation. Her early imaginative writings – in particular *Janet's Repentance*, *Adam Bede*, the first two-thirds of *The Mill on the Floss*, and much of *Silas Marner* – had a freshness, a bright vitality, which, if she could have kept it burnished, would have preserved her from all effects of contemporary want of sympathy. When we analyse the charm of the stories just mentioned, we find that it consists very largely in their felicity of expressed reminiscence. There is little evidence in them of the inventive faculty, but a great deal of the reproductive. Now, we have to remember that contemporaries are quite in the dark as to matters about which, after the publication of memoirs and correspondence and recollections, later readers are exactly informed. We may now know that Sir Christopher Cheverel closely reproduces the features of a real Sir Roger Newdigate, and that Dinah Morris is Mrs. Samuel Evans photographed, but readers of 1860 did not know that, and were at liberty to conceive the unknown magician in the act of calling up a noble English gentleman and a saintly Methodist preacher from the depths of her inner consciousness. Whether this was so or not would not matter to anyone, if George Eliot could have continued the act of pictorial reproduction without flagging. The world would have long gazed with pleasure into the camera obscura of Warwickshire, as she reeled off one dark picture after another, but unhappily she was not contented with her success, and she aimed at things beyond her reach.

Her failure, which was, after all (let us not exaggerate), the partial and accidental failure of a great genius, began when she turned from passive acts of memory to a strenuous exercise of intellect. If I had time and space, it would be very interesting to study George Eliot's attitude towards that mighty woman, the full-bosomed caryatid of romantic literature, who had by a few years preceded her. When George Eliot was at the outset of her own literary career, which as we know was much belated, George Sand had already bewitched and thrilled and scandalized Europe for a generation. The impact of the Frenchwoman's mind on that of her English contemporary produced sparks or flashes of starry enthusiasm. George Eliot, in 1848, was "bowing before George Sand in eternal gratitude to that great power of God manifested in her," and her praise of the French peasant-idyls was unbounded. But when she herself began to write novels she grew to be less and less in sympathy with the French romantic school. A French critic of her own day laid down the axiom that "il faut bien que le roman se rapproche de la poésie ou de la science." George Sand had thrown herself

unreservedly into the poetic camp. She acknowledged "mon instinct m'eût poussée vers les abîmes," and she confessed, with that stalwart good sense which carried her genius over so many marshy places, that her temperament had often driven her, "au mépris de la raison ou de la vérité morale," into pure romantic extravagance.

But George Eliot, whatever may have been her preliminary enthusiasms, was radically and permanently anti-romantic. This was the source of her strength and of her weakness; this, carefully examined, explains the soaring and the sinking of her fame. Unlike George Sand, she kept to the facts; she found that all her power quitted her at once if she dealt with imaginary events and the clash of ideal passions. She had been drawn in her youth to sincere admiration of the Indianas and Lelias of her florid French contemporary, and we become aware that in the humdrum years at Coventry, when the surroundings of her own life were arduous and dusty, she felt a longing to spread her wings and fly up and out to some dim Cloud-Cuckoo Land the confines of which were utterly vague to her. The romantic method of Dumas, for instance, and even of Walter Scott, appealed to her as a mode of escaping to dreamland from the flatness and vulgarity of life under the "miserable reign of Mammon." But she could not achieve such flights; her literary character was of a totally different formation. What was fabulous, what was artificial, did not so much strike her with disgust as render her paralysed. Her only escape from mediocrity, she found, was to give a philosophical interest to common themes. In consequence, as she advanced in life, and came more under the influence of George Henry Lewes, she became less and less well disposed towards the French fiction of her day, rejecting even Balzac, to whom she seems, strangely enough, to have preferred Lessing. That Lessing and Balzac should be names pronounced in relation itself throws a light on the temper of the speaker.

Most novelists seem to have begun to tell stories almost as early as musicians begin to trifle with the piano. The child keeps other children awake, after nurse has gone about her business, by reeling off inventions in the dark. But George Eliot showed, so far as records inform us, no such aptitude in infancy or even in early youth. The history of her start as a novel-writer is worthy of study. It appears that it was not until the autumn of 1856 that she, "in a dreamy mood," fancied herself writing a story. This was, I gather, immediately on her return from Germany, where she had been touring about with Lewes, with whom she had now been living for two years. Lewes said to her, "You have wit, description, and philosophy – those go a good way towards the production of a novel," and he encouraged her to write about the virtues and vices of the clergy, as she had observed them at Griff and at Coventry. *Amos Barton* was the immediate result, and the stately line of stories which was to close in *Daniel Deronda* twenty years later was started on its brilliant career. But what of the author? She was a storm-tried matron of thirty-seven, who had sub-edited the *Westminster Review*, who had spent years in translating Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and had sunk exhausted in a still more strenuous wrestling with the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* of Spinoza, who had worked with Delarive at Experimental Physics in Geneva, and who had censured, as superficial, John Stuart Mill's treatment of Whewell's *Moral Philosophy*. This heavily-built Miss Marian Evans, now dubiously known as Mrs. Lewes, whose features at that time are familiar to us by the admirable paintings and drawings of Sir Frederick Burton, was in training to be a social reformer, a moral philosopher, an apostle of the creed of Christendom, an anti-theological professor, anything in the world rather than a writer of idle tales.

But the tales proved to be a hundredfold more attractive to the general public than articles upon taxation or translations from German sceptics. We all must allow that at last, however tardily and surprisingly, George Eliot had discovered her true vocation. Let us consider in what capacity she entered this field of fiction. She entered it as an observer of life more diligent and more meticulous perhaps than any other living person. She entered it also with a store of emotional experience and with a richness of moral sensibility which were almost as unique. She had strong ethical prejudices, and a wealth of recollected examples by which she could justify them. Her memory was accurate, minute, and well arranged, and she had always enjoyed retrospection and encouraged herself in the cultivation of it. She was very sympathetic, very tolerant, and although she had lived in the very

Temple of Priggishness with her Brays and her Hennells and her Sibrees, she remained singularly simple and unaffected. Rather sad, one pictures her in 1856, rather dreamy, burdened with an excess of purely intellectual preoccupation, wandering over Europe consumed by a constant, but unconfessed, nostalgia for her own country, coming back to it with a sense that the Avon was lovelier than the Arno. Suddenly, in that "dreamy mood," there comes over her a desire to build up again the homes of her childhood, to forget all about Rousseau and experimental physics, and to reconstruct the "dear old quaintnesses" of the Arbury of twenty-five years before.

If we wish to see what it was which this mature philosopher and earnest critic of behaviour had to produce for the surprise of her readers, we may examine the description of the farm at Donnithorne in *Adam Bede*. The solemn lady, who might seem such a terror to ill-doers, had yet a packet of the most delicious fondants in the pocket of her bombazine gown. The names of these sweetmeats, which were of a flavour and a texture delicious to the tongue, might be Mrs. Poyser or Lizzie Jerome or the sisters Dodson, but they all came from the Warwickshire factory at Griff, and they were all manufactured with the sugar and spice of memory. So long as George Eliot lived in the past, and extracted her honey from those wonderful cottage gardens which fill her early pages with their colour and their odour, the solidity and weight of her intellectual methods in other fields did not interfere, or interfered in a negligible way, with the power and intensity of the entertainment she offered. We could wish for nothing better. English literature has, of their own class, nothing better to offer than certain chapters of *Adam Bede* or than the beginning of *The Mill on the Floss*.

But, from the first, if we now examine coldly and inquisitively, there was a moth sleeping in George Eliot's rich attire. This moth was pedantry, the result, doubtless, of too much erudition encouraging a natural tendency in her mind, which as we have seen was acquisitive rather than inventive. It was unfortunate for her genius that after her early enthusiasm for French culture she turned to Germany and became, in measure, like so many powerful minds of her generation, Teutonized. This fostered the very tendencies which it was desirable to eradicate. One can but speculate what would have been the result on her genius of a little more Paris and a little less Berlin. Her most successful immediate rival in France was Octave Feuillet; the *Scenes of Clerical Life* answer in time to *Le Roman d'un Jeune Homme Pauvre*, and *Monsieur de Camors* to *Felix Holt*. There could not be a stronger or more instructive contrast than between the elegant fairyland of the one and the robust realism of the other. But our admirable pastoral writer, whose inward eye was stored with the harmonies and humours of Shakespeare's country, was not content with her mastery of the past. She looked forward to a literature of the future. She trusted to her brain rather than to those tired servants, her senses, and more and more her soul was invaded by the ambition to invent a new thing, the scientific novel, dealing with the growth of institutions and the analysis of individual character.

The critics of her own time were satisfied that she had done this, and that she had founded the psychological novel. There was much to be said in favour of such an opinion. In the later books it is an undeniable fact that George Eliot displays a certain sense of the inevitable progress of life which was new. It may seem paradoxical to see the peculiar characteristics of Zola or of Mr. George Moore in *Middlemarch*, but there is much to be said for the view that George Eliot was the direct forerunner of those naturalistic novelists. Like them, she sees life as an organism, or even as a progress. George Eliot in her contemplation of the human beings she invents is a traveller, who is provided with a map. No Norman church or ivied ruin takes her by surprise, because she has seen that it was bound to come, and recognizes it when it does come. Death, the final railway station, is ever in her mind; she sees it on her map, and gathers her property around her to be ready when the train shall stop. This psychological clairvoyance gives her a great power when she does not abuse it, but unfortunately from the very first there was in her a tendency, partly consequent on her mental training, but also not a little on her natural constitution, to dwell in a hard and pedagogic manner on it. She was not content to please, she must explain and teach as well.



Her comparative failure to please made its definite appearance first in the laboured and overcharged romance of *Romola*. But a careful reader will detect it in her earliest writings. Quite early in *Amos Barton*, for instance, when Mrs. Hackit observes of the local colliers that they "passed their time in doing nothing but swilling ale and smoking, like the beasts that perish," the author immediately spoils this delightful remark by explaining, like a schoolmaster, that Mrs. Hackit was "speaking, we may presume, in a remotely analogical sense." The laughter dies upon our lips. Useless pedantry of this kind spoils many a happy touch of humour, Mrs. Poyser alone perhaps having wholly escaped from it. It would be entirely unjust to accuse George Eliot, at all events until near the end of her life, of intellectual pride. She was, on the contrary, of a very humble spirit, timorous and susceptible of discouragement. But her humility made her work all the harder at her task of subtle philosophical analysis. It would have been far better for her if she had possessed less of the tenacity of Herbert Spencer and more of the recklessness of George Sand. An amusing but painful example of her Sisyphus temper, always rolling the stone uphill with groans and sweat, is to be found in her own account of the way she "crammed up" for the composition of *Romola*. She tells us of the wasting toil with which she worked up innumerable facts about Florence, and in particular how she laboured long over the terrible question whether Easter could have been "retarded" in the year 1492. On this, Sir Leslie Stephen – one of her best critics, and one of the most indulgent – aptly queries, "What would have become of *Ivanhoe* if Scott had bothered himself about the possible retardation of Easter? The answer, indeed, is obvious, that *Ivanhoe* would not have been written."

The effect of all this on George Eliot's achievement was what must always occur when an intellect which is purely acquisitive and distributive insists on doing work that is appropriate only to imagination. If we read very carefully the scene preceding Savonarola's sermon to the Dominicans at San Marco, we perceive that it is built up almost in Flaubert's manner, but without Flaubert's magic, touch by touch, out of books. The author does not see what she describes in a sort of luminous hallucination, but she dresses up in language of her own what she has carefully read in Burlamacchi or in Villari. The most conscientious labour, expended by the most powerful brain, is incapable of producing an illusion of life by these means. George Eliot may even possibly have been conscious of this, for she speaks again and again, not of writing with ecstasy of tears and laughter, as Dickens did, but of falling into "a state of so much wretchedness in attempting to concentrate my thoughts on the construction of my novel" that nothing but a tremendous and sustained effort of the will carried her on at all. In this vain and terrible wrestling with incongruous elements she wore out her strength and her joy, and it is heart-rending to watch so noble a genius and so lofty a character as hers wasted in the whirlpool. One fears that a sense of obscure failure added to her tortures, and one is tempted to see a touch of autobiography in the melancholy of Mrs. Transome (in *Felix Holt*), of whom we are told that "her knowledge and accomplishments had become as valueless as old-fashioned stucco ornaments, of which the substance was never worth anything, while the form is no longer to the taste of any living mortal."

The notion that George Eliot was herself, in spite of all the laudation showered upon her, consciously in want of some element essential for her success is supported by the very curious fact that from 1864 to 1869, that is to say through nearly one-quarter of her whole literary career, she devoted herself entirely to various experiments in verse. She was so preternaturally intelligent that there is nothing unlikely in the supposition that she realized what was her chief want as a writer of imaginative prose. She claims, and she will always be justified in claiming, a place in the splendid roll of prominent English writers. But she holds it in spite of a certain drawback which forbids her from ever appearing in the front rank as a great writer. Her prose has fine qualities of force and wit, it is pictorial and persuasive, but it misses one prime but rather subtle merit, it never sings. The masters of the finest English are those who have received the admonition *Cantate Domino!* They sing a new song unto the Lord. Among George Eliot's prose contemporaries there were several who obeyed this command. Ruskin, for instance, above all the Victorian prose-writers, shouts like the morning-star. It

is the peculiar gift of all great prosaists. Take so rough an executant as Hazlitt: "Harmer Hill stooped with all its pines, to listen to a poet, as he passed!" That is the chanting faculty in prose, which all the greatest men possess; but George Eliot has no trace of it, except sometimes, faintly, in the sheer fun of her peasants' conversation. I do not question that she felt the lack herself, and that it was this which, subconsciously, led her to make a profound study of the art of verse.

She hoped, at the age of forty-four, to hammer herself into poetry by dint of sheer labour and will-power. She read the great masters, and she analysed them in the light of prosodical manuals. In 1871 she told Tennyson that Professor Sylvester's "laws for verse-making had been useful to her." Tennyson replied, "I can't understand that," and no wonder. Sylvester was a facetious mathematician who undertook to teach the art of poetry in so many lessons. George Eliot humbly working away at Sylvester, and telling Tennyson that she was finding him "useful," and Tennyson, whose melodies pursued him, like bees in pursuit of a bee-master, expressing a gruff good-natured scepticism – what a picture it raises! But George Eliot persisted, with that astounding firmness of application which she had, and she produced quite a large body of various verse. She wrote a Comtist tragedy, *The Spanish Gypsy*, of which I must speak softly, since, omnivorous as I am, I have never been able to swallow it. But she wrote many other things, epics and sonnets and dialogues and the rest of them, which are not so hard to read. She actually printed privately for her friends two little garlands, *Agatha* (1868) and *Brother and Sister* (1869), which are the only "rare issues" of hers sought after by collectors, for she was not given to bibliographical curiosity. These verses and many others she polished and re-wrote with untiring assiduity, and in 1874 she published a substantial volume of them. I have been reading them over again, in the intense wish to be pleased with them, but it is impossible – the root of the matter is not in them. There is an Arion, which is stately in the manner of Marvell. The end of this lyric is tense and decisive, but there is the radical absence of song. George Eliot admired Wordsworth very much: occasionally she reproduces very closely the duller parts of *The Excursion*. In the long piece of blank verse called *A College Breakfast Party*, which she wrote in 1874, almost all Tennyson's faults are reconstructed on the plan of the Chinese tailor who carefully imitates the rents in the English coat he is to copy. There is a Goethe-like poem, of a gnomic order, called *Self and Life*, stuffed with valuable thoughts as a turkey is stuffed with chestnuts.

And it is all so earnest and so intellectual, and it does so much credit to Sylvester. After long consideration, I have come to the conclusion that the following sonnet, from *Brother and Sister*, is the best piece of sustained poetry that George Eliot achieved. It deals with the pathetic and beautiful relations which existed between her and her elder brother Isaac, the Tom Tulliver of *The Mill on the Floss*:

His sorrow was my sorrow, and his joy  
Sent little leaps and laughs through all my frame;  
My doll seemed lifeless, and no girlish toy  
Had any reason when my brother came.  
I knelt with him at marbles, marked his fling,  
Cut the ringed stem and made the apple drop,  
Or watched him winding close the spiral string  
That looped the orbits of the humming-top.  
Grasped by such fellowship my vagrant thought  
Ceased with dream-fruit dream-wishes to fulfil;  
My æry-picturing fantasy was taught  
Subjection to the harder, truer skill  
That seeks with deeds to grave a thought-tracked line,  
And by "What is" "What will be" to define.

How near this is to true poetry, and yet how many miles away!

At last George Eliot seems to have felt that she could never hope, with all her intellect, to catch the unconsidered music which God lavishes on the idle linnet and the frivolous chaffinch. She returned to her own strenuous business of building up the psychological novel. She wrote *Middlemarch*, which appeared periodically throughout 1872 and as a book early the following year. It was received with great enthusiasm, as marking the return of a popular favourite who had been absent for several years. *Middlemarch* is the history of three parallel lives of women, who "with dim lights and tangled circumstances tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement," although "to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness." The three ineffectual St. Theresas, as their creator conceived them, were Dorothea, Rosamond, and Mary, and they "shaped the thought and deed" of Casaubon and Ladislaw and Fred Vincy. *Middlemarch* is constructed with unflinching power, and the picture of commonplace English country life which it gives is vivacious after a mechanical fashion, but all the charm of the early stories has evaporated, and has left behind it merely a residuum of unimaginative satire. The novel is a very remarkable instance of elaborate mental resources misapplied, and genius revolving, with tremendous machinery, like some great water-wheel, while no water is flowing underneath it.

When a realist loses hold on reality all is lost, and I for one can find not a word to say in favour of *Daniel Deronda*, her next and last novel, which came out, with popularity at first more wonderful than ever, in 1876. But her inner circle of admirers was beginning to ask one another uneasily whether her method was not now too calculated, her effects too plainly premeditated. The intensity of her early works was gone. Readers began to resent her pedantry, her elaboration of allusions, her loss of simplicity. They missed the vivid rural scenes and the flashes of delicious humour which had starred the serious pages of *Adam Bede* and *The Mill* like the lemon-yellow pansies and potentillas on a dark Welsh moor. They regretted the ease of the conversation in her early books, where it had always been natural, lively, and brief; it was now heavy and doctrinaire. Tennyson rebelled against the pompousness, and said, in his blunt way, that Jane Austen knew her business better, a courageous thing to say in Victorian circles fifty years ago. Then came *Theophrastus Such*, a collection of cumbrous and didactic essays which defy perusal; and finally, soon after her death, her *Correspondence*, a terrible disappointment to all her admirers, and a blow from which even the worship of Lord Acton never recovered. Of George Eliot might have been repeated Swift's epitaph on Sir John Vanbrugh:

Lie heavy on him, earth, for he  
Laid many a heavy load on thee.

It was the fatal error of George Eliot, so admirable, so elevated, so disinterested, that for the last ten years of her brief literary life she did practically nothing but lay heavy loads on literature.

On the whole, then, it is not possible to regard the place which George Eliot holds in English literature as so prominent a one as was rather rashly awarded her by her infatuated contemporaries. It is the inevitable result of "tall talk" about likeness to Dante and Goethe that the figure so unduly magnified fails to support such comparisons when the perspective is lengthened. George Eliot is unduly neglected now, but it is the revenge of time on her for the praise expended on her works in her lifetime. Another matter which militates against her fame to-day is her strenuous solemnity. One of the philosophers who knelt at the footsteps of her throne said that she was "the emblem of a generation distracted between the intense need of believing and the difficulty of belief." Well, we happen to live, fortunately or unfortunately for ourselves, in a generation which is "distracted" by quite other problems, and we are sheep that look up to George Eliot and are not fed by her ponderous moral aphorisms and didactic ethical influence. Perhaps another generation will follow us which will be more patient, and students yet unborn will read her gladly. Let us never forget, however, that she

worked with all her heart in a spirit of perfect honesty, that she brought a vast intelligence to the service of literature, and that she aimed from first to last at the loftiest goal of intellectual ambition. Where she failed, it was principally from an inborn lack of charm, not from anything ignoble or impure in her mental disposition. After all, to have added to the slender body of English fiction seven novels the names of which are known to every cultivated person is not to have failed, but to have signally, if only relatively, succeeded.

## HENRY JAMES

### I

VOLUMINOUS as had been the writings of Henry James since 1875, it was not until he approached the end of his career that he began to throw any light on the practical events and social adventures of his own career. He had occasionally shown that he could turn from the psychology of imaginary characters to the record of real lives without losing any part of his delicate penetration or his charm of portraiture. He had, in particular, written the *Life of Hawthorne* in 1879, between *Daisy Miller* and *An International Episode*; and again in 1903, at the height of his latest period, he had produced a specimen of that period in his elusive and parenthetical but very beautiful so-called *Life of W. W. Story*. But these biographies threw no more light upon his own adventures than did his successive volumes of critical and topographical essays, in which the reader may seek long before he detects the sparkle of a crumb of personal fact. Henry James, at the age of seventy, had not begun to reveal himself behind the mask which spoke in the tones of a world of imaginary characters.

So saying, I do not forget that in the general edition of his collected, or rather selected, novels and tales, published from 1908 onwards, Henry James prefixed to each volume an introduction which assumed to be wholly biographical. He yielded, he said, "to the pleasure of placing on record the circumstances" in which each successive tale was written. I well recollect the terms in which he spoke of these prefaces before he began to write them. They were to be full and confidential, they were to throw to the winds all restraints of conventional reticence, they were to take us, with eyes unbandaged, into the inmost sanctum of his soul. They appeared at last, in small print, and they were extremely extensive, but truth obliges me to say that I found them highly disappointing. Constitutionally fitted to take pleasure in the accent of almost everything that Henry James ever wrote, I have to confess that these prefaces constantly baffle my eagerness. Not for a moment would I deny that they throw interesting light on the technical craft of a self-respecting novelist, but they are dry, remote, and impersonal to a strange degree. It is as though the author felt a burning desire to confide in the reader, whom he positively button-holes in the endeavour, but that the experience itself evades him, fails to find expression, and falls stillborn, while other matters, less personal and less important, press in and take their place against the author's wish. Henry James proposed, in each instance, to disclose "the contributive value of the accessory facts in a given artistic case." This is, indeed, what we require in the history or the autobiography of an artist, whether painter or musician or man of letters. But this includes the production of anecdotes, of salient facts, of direct historical statements, which Henry James seemed in 1908 to be completely incapacitated from giving, so that really, in the introductions to some of these novels in the Collected Edition, it is difficult to know what the beloved novelist is endeavouring to divulge. He becomes almost chimæra bombinating in a vacuum.

Had we lost him soon after the appearance of the latest of these prefaces – that prefixed to *The Golden Bowl*, in which the effort to reveal something which is not revealed amounts almost to an agony – it would have been impossible to reconstruct the life of Henry James by the closest examination of his published writings. Ingenious commentators would have pieced together conjectures from such tales as *The Altar of the Dead* and *The Lesson of the Master*, and have insisted, more or less plausibly, on their accordance with what the author *must* have thought or done, endured or attempted. But, after all, these would have been "conjectures," not more definitely based than what bold spirits use when they construct lives of Shakespeare, or, for that matter, of Homer. Fortunately, in 1913, the desire to place some particulars of the career of his marvellous brother William in the setting of his "immediate native and domestic air," led Henry James to contemplate, with minuteness, the fading memories

of his own childhood. Starting with a biographical study of William James, he found it impossible to treat the family development at all adequately without extending the survey to his own growth as well, and thus, at the age of seventy, Henry became for the first time, and almost unconsciously, an autobiographer.

He had completed two large volumes of *Memories*, and was deep in a third, when death took him from us. *A Small Boy and Others* deals with such extreme discursiveness as is suitable in a collection of the fleeting impressions of infancy, from his birth in 1843 to his all but fatal attack of typhus fever at Boulogne-sur-Mer in (perhaps) 1857. I say "perhaps" because the wanton evasion of any sort of help in the way of dates is characteristic of the narrative, as it would be of childish memories. The next instalment was *Notes of a Son and Brother*, which opens in 1860, a doubtful period of three years being leaped over lightly, and closes – as I guess from an allusion to George Eliot's *Spanish Gypsy* – in 1868. The third instalment, dictated in the autumn of 1914 and laid aside unfinished, is the posthumous *The Middle Years*, faultlessly edited by the piety of Mr. Percy Lubbock in 1917. Here the tale is taken up in 1869, and is occupied, without much attempt at chronological order, with memories of two years in London. As Henry James did not revise, or perhaps even re-read, these pages, we are free to form our conclusion as to whether he would or would not have vouchsafed to put their disjected parts into some more anatomical order.

Probably he would not have done so. The tendency of his genius had never been, and at the end was less than ever, in the direction of concinnity. He repudiated arrangement, he wilfully neglected the precise adjustment of parts. The three autobiographical volumes will always be documents precious in the eyes of his admirers. They are full of beauty and nobility, they exhibit with delicacy, and sometimes even with splendour, the qualities of his character. But it would be absurd to speak of them as easy to read, or as fulfilling what is demanded from an ordinary biographer. They have the tone of Veronese, but nothing of his definition. A broad canvas is spread before us, containing many figures in social conjuncture. But the plot, the single "story" which is being told, is drowned in misty radiance. Out of this *chiaroscuro* there leap suddenly to our vision a sumptuous head and throat, a handful of roses, the glitter of a satin sleeve, but it is only when we shut our eyes and think over what we have looked at that any coherent plan is revealed to us, or that we detect any species of composition. It is a case which calls for editorial help, and I hope that when the three fragments of autobiography are reprinted as a single composition, no prudery of hesitation to touch the sacred ark will prevent the editor from prefixing a skeleton chronicle of actual dates and facts. It will take nothing from the dignity of the luminous reveries in their original shape.

Such a skeleton will tell us that Henry James was born at 2 Washington Place, New York, on April 15th, 1843, and that he was the second child of his parents, the elder by one year being William, who grew up to be the most eminent philosopher whom America has produced. Their father, Henry James the elder, was himself a philosopher, whose ideas, which the younger Henry frankly admitted to be beyond his grasp, were expounded by William James in 1884, in a preface to their father's posthumous papers. Henry was only one year old when the family paid a long visit to Paris, but his earliest recollections were of Albany, whence the Jameses migrated to New York until 1855. They then transferred their home to Europe for three years, during which time the child Henry imbibed what he afterwards called "the European virus." In 1855 he was sent to Geneva for purposes of education, which were soon abandoned, and the whole family began an aimless wandering through London, Paris, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Newport, Geneva, and America again, nothing but the Civil War sufficing to root this fugitive household in one abiding home.

Henry James's health forced him to be a spectator of the war, in which his younger brothers fought. He went to Harvard in 1862 to study law, but was now beginning to feel a more and more irresistible call to take up letters as a profession, and the Harvard Law School left little or no direct impression upon him. He formed a close and valuable friendship with William Dean Howells, seven years his senior, and the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly*, of which Howells was then assistant editor,

were open to him from 1865. He lived for the next four years in very poor health, and with no great encouragement from himself or others, always excepting Howells, at Cambridge, Massachusetts. Early in 1869 he ventured to return to Europe, where he spent fifteen months in elegant but fruitful vagabondage. There was much literary work done, most of which he carefully suppressed in later life. The reader will, however, discover, tucked away in the thirteenth volume of the Collected Edition, a single waif from this rejected epoch, the tale called *A Passionate Pilgrim*, written on his return to America in 1870. This visit to Europe absolutely determined his situation; his arrival in New York stimulated and tortured his nostalgia for the old world, and in May, 1872, he flew back here once more to the European enchantment.

Here, practically, the biographical information respecting Henry James which has hitherto been given to the world ceases, for the fragment of *The Middle Years*, so far as can be gathered, contains few recollections which can be dated later than his thirtieth year. It was said of Marivaux that he cultivated no faculty but that *de ne vivre que pour voir et pour entendre*. In a similar spirit Henry James took up his dwelling in fashionable London lodgings in March, 1869. He had come from America with the settled design of making a profound study of English manners, and there were two aspects of the subject which stood out for him above all others. One of these was the rural beauty of ancient country places, the other was the magnitude – "the inconceivable immensity," as he put it – of London. He told his sister, "The place sits on you, broods on you, stamps on you with the feet of its myriad bipeds and quadrupeds." From his lodgings in Half Moon Street, quiet enough in themselves, he had the turmoil of the West End at his elbow, Piccadilly, Park Lane, St. James's Street, all within the range of a five minutes' stroll. He plunged into the vortex with incredible gusto, "knocking about in a quiet way and deeply enjoying my little adventures." This was his first mature experience of London, of which he remained until the end of his life perhaps the most infatuated student, the most "passionate pilgrim," that America has ever sent us.

But his health was still poor, and for his constitution's sake he went in the summer of 1869 to Great Malvern. He went alone, and it is to be remarked of him that, social as he was, and inclined to a deep indulgence in the company of his friends, his habit of life was always in the main a solitary one. He had no constant associates, and he did not shrink from long periods of isolation, which he spent in reading and writing, but also in a concentrated contemplation of the passing scene, whatever it might be. It was alone that he now made a tour of the principal English cathedral and university towns, expatiating to himself on the perfection of the weather – "the dozen exquisite days of the English year, days stamped with a purity unknown in climates where fine weather is cheap." It was alone that he made acquaintance with Oxford, of which city he became at once the impassioned lover which he continued to be to the end, raving from Boston in 1870 of the supreme gratifications of Oxford as "the most dignified and most educated" of the cradles of our race. It was alone that during these enchanting weeks he made himself acquainted with the unimagined loveliness of English hamlets buried in immemorial leafage and whispered to by meandering rivulets in the warm recesses of antiquity. These, too, found in Henry James a worshipper more ardent, it may almost be averred, than any other who had crossed the Atlantic to their shrine.

Having formed his basis for the main construction of his English studies, Henry James passed over to the Continent, and conducted a similar pilgrimage of entranced obsession through Switzerland and Italy. His wanderings, "rapturous and solitary," were, as in England, hampered by no social engagement; "I see no people to speak of," he wrote, "or for that matter to speak to." He returned to America in April, 1870, at the close of a year which proved critical in his career, and which laid its stamp on the whole of his future work. He had been kindly received in artistic and literary circles in London; he had conversed with Ruskin, with William Morris, with Aubrey de Vere, but it is plain that while he observed the peculiarities of these eminent men with the closest avidity, he made no impression whatever upon them. The time for Henry James to "make an impression" on others was not come yet; he was simply the well-bred, rather shy, young American invalid, with excellent

introductions, who crossed the path of English activities, almost without casting a shadow. He had published no book; he had no distinct calling; he was a deprecating and punctilious young stranger from somewhere in Massachusetts, immature-looking for all his seven-and-twenty years.

Some further uneventful seasons, mainly spent in America but diversified by tours in Germany and Italy, bring us to 1875, when Henry James came over from Cambridge with the definite project, at last, of staying in Europe "for good." He took rooms in Paris, at 29 Rue de Luxembourg, and he penetrated easily into the very exclusive literary society which at that time revolved around Flaubert and Edmond de Goncourt. This year in Paris was another highly critical period in Henry James's intellectual history. He was still, at the mature age of thirty-two, almost an amateur in literature, having been content, up to that time, to produce scarcely anything which his mature taste did not afterwards repudiate. *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1870), of which I have spoken above, is the only waif and stray of the pre-1873 years which he has permitted to survive. The first edition of this short story is now not easy of reference, and I have not seen it; the reprint of 1908 is obviously, and is doubtless vigorously, re-handled. Enough, however, remains of what must be original to show that, in a rather crude, and indeed almost hysterical form, the qualities of Henry James's genius were, in 1869, what they continued to be in 1909. He has conquered, however, in *A Passionate Pilgrim*, no command yet over his enthusiasm, his delicate sense of beauty, his apprehension of the exquisite colour of antiquity.

From the French associates of this time he derived practical help in his profession, though without their being aware of what they gave him. He was warmly attracted to Gustave Flaubert, who had just published *La Tentation de St. Antoine*, a dazzled admiration of which was the excuse which threw the young American at the feet of the Rouen giant. This particular admiration dwindled with the passage of time, but Henry James continued faithful to the author of *Madame Bovary*. It was Turgenev who introduced him to Flaubert, from whom he passed to Guy de Maupassant, then an athlete of four-and-twenty, and still scintillating in that blaze of juvenile virility which always fascinated Henry James. In the train of Edmond de Goncourt came Zola, vociferous over his late tribulation of having *L'Assommoir* stopped in its serial issue; Alphonse Daudet, whose recent *Jack* was exercising over tens of thousands of readers the tyranny of tears; and François Coppée, the almost exact coeval of Henry James, and now author of a *Luthier de Crémone*, which had placed him high among French poets. That the young American, with no apparent claim to attention except the laborious perfection of his French speech, was welcomed and ultimately received on terms of intimacy in this the most exclusive of European intellectual circles is curious. Henry James was accustomed to deprecate the notion that these Frenchmen took the least interest in him: "they have never read a line of me, they have never even persuaded themselves that there was a line of me which anyone could read," he once said to me. How should they, poor charming creatures, in their self-sufficing Latin intensity, know what or whether some barbarian had remotely "written"? But this does not end the marvel, because, read or not read, there was Henry James among them, affectionately welcomed, talked to familiarly about "technique," and even about "sales," like a fellow-craftsman. There must evidently have developed by this time something modestly "impressive" about him, and I cannot doubt that these Parisian masters of language more or less dimly divined that he too was, in some medium not by them to be penetrated, a master.

After this fruitful year in Paris, the first result of which was the publication in London of his earliest surviving novel, *Roderick Hudson*, and the completion of *The American*, Henry James left his "glittering, charming, civilized Paris" and settled in London. He submitted himself, as he wrote to his brother William in 1878, "without reserve to that Londonizing process of which the effect is to convince you that, having lived here, you may, if need be, abjure civilization and bury yourself in the country, but may not, in pursuit of civilization, live in any smaller town." He plunged deeply into the study of London, externally and socially, and into the production of literature, in which he was now as steadily active as he was elegantly proficient. These novels of his earliest period have neither the profundity nor the originality of those of his middle and final periods, but they have



an exquisite freshness of their own, and a workmanship the lucidity and logic of which he owed in no small measure to his conversations with Daudet and Maupassant, and to his, at that time almost exclusive, reading of the finest French fiction. He published *The American* in 1877, *The Europeans* and *Daisy Miller* in 1878, and *An International Episode* in 1879. He might advance in stature and breadth; he might come to disdain the exiguous beauty of these comparatively juvenile books, but now at all events were clearly revealed all the qualities which were to develop later, and to make Henry James unique among writers of Anglo-Saxon race.

His welcome into English society was remarkable if we reflect that he seemed to have little to give in return for what it offered except his social adaptability, his pleasant and still formal amenity, and his admirable capacity for listening. It cannot be repeated too clearly that the Henry James of those early days had very little of the impressiveness of his later manner. He went everywhere, sedately, watchfully, graciously, but never prominently. In the winter of 1878-79 it is recorded that he dined out in London 107 times, but it is highly questionable whether this amazing assiduity at the best dinner-tables will be found to have impressed itself on any Greville or Crabb Robinson who was taking notes at the time. He was strenuously living up to his standard, "my charming little standard of wit, of grace, of good manners, of vivacity, of urbanity, of intelligence, of what makes an easy and natural style of intercourse." He was watching the rather gross and unironic, but honest and vigorous, English upper-middle-class of that day with mingled feelings, in which curiosity and a sort of remote sympathy took a main part. At 107 London dinners he observed the ever-shifting pieces of the general kaleidoscope with tremendous acuteness, and although he thought their reds and yellows would have been improved by a slight infusion of the Florentine harmony, on the whole he was never weary of watching their evolutions. In this way the years slipped by, while he made a thousand acquaintances and a dozen durable friendships. It is a matter of pride and happiness to me that I am able to touch on one of the latter.

It is often curiously difficult for intimate friends, who have the impression in later years that they must always have known one another, to recall the occasion and the place where they first met. That was the case with Henry James and me. Several times we languidly tried to recover those particulars, but without success. I think, however, that it was at some dinner-party that we first met, and as the incident is dubiously connected with the publication of the *Hawthorne* in 1879, and with Mr. (now Lord) Morley, whom we both frequently saw at that epoch, I am pretty sure that the event took place early in 1880. The acquaintance, however, did not "ripen," as people say, until the summer of 1882, when in connexion with an article on the drawings of George Du Maurier, which I was anxious Henry James should write – having heard him express himself with high enthusiasm regarding these works of art – he invited me to go to see him and to talk over the project. I found him, one sunshiny afternoon, in his lodgings on the first floor of No. 3 Bolton Street, at the Piccadilly end of the street, where the houses look askew into Green Park. Here he had been living ever since he came over from France in 1876, and the situation was eminently characteristic of the impassioned student of London life and haunter of London society which he had now become.

Stretched on the sofa and apologizing for not rising to greet me, his appearance gave me a little shock, for I had not thought of him as an invalid. He hurriedly and rather evasively declared that he was not that, but that a muscular weakness of his spine obliged him, as he said, "to assume the horizontal posture" during some hours of every day in order to bear the almost unbroken routine of evening engagements. I think that this weakness gradually passed away, but certainly for many years it handicapped his activity. I recall his appearance, seen then for the first time by daylight; there was something shadowy about it, the face framed in dark brown hair cut short in the Paris fashion, and in equally dark beard, rather loose and "fluffy." He was in deep mourning, his mother having died five or six months earlier, and he himself having but recently returned from a melancholy visit to America, where he had unwillingly left his father, who seemed far from well. His manner was grave, extremely courteous, but a little formal and frightened, which seemed strange in a man living

in constant communication with the world. Our business regarding Du Maurier was soon concluded, and James talked with increasing ease, but always with a punctilious hesitancy, about Paris, where he seemed, to my dazzlement, to know even a larger number of persons of distinction than he did in London.

He promised, before I left, to return my visit, but news of the alarming illness of his father called him suddenly to America. He wrote to me from Boston in April, 1883, but he did not return to London until the autumn of that year. Our intercourse was then resumed, and, immediately, on the familiar footing which it preserved, without an hour's abatement, until the sad moment of his fatal illness. When he returned to Bolton Street – this was in August, 1883 – he had broken all the ties which held him to residence in America, a country which, as it turned out, he was not destined to revisit for more than twenty years. By this means Henry James became a homeless man in a peculiar sense, for he continued to be looked upon as a foreigner in London, while he seemed to have lost citizenship in the United States. It was a little later than this that that somewhat acidulated patriot, Colonel Higginson, in reply to someone who said that Henry James was a cosmopolitan, remarked, "Hardly! for a cosmopolitan is at home even in his own country!" This condition made James, although superficially gregarious, essentially isolated, and though his books were numerous and were greatly admired, they were tacitly ignored alike in summaries of English and of American current literature. There was no escape from this dilemma. Henry James was equally determined not to lay down his American birthright and not to reside in America. Every year of his exile, therefore, emphasized the fact of his separation from all other Anglo-Saxons, and he endured, in the world of letters, the singular fate of being a man without a country.

The collection of his private letters, therefore, which has just been published under the sympathetic editorship of Mr. Percy Lubbock, reveals the adventures of an author who, long excluded from two literatures, is now eagerly claimed by both of them, and it displays those movements of a character of great energy and singular originality which circumstances have hitherto concealed from curiosity. There was very little on the surface of his existence to bear evidence to the passionate intensity of the stream beneath. This those who have had the privilege of seeing his letters know is marvellously revealed in his private correspondence. A certain change in his life was brought about by the arrival in 1885 of his sister Alice, who, in now confirmed ill-health, was persuaded to make Bournemouth and afterwards Leamington her home. He could not share her life, but at all events he could assiduously diversify it by his visits, and Bournemouth had a second attraction for him in the presence of Robert Louis Stevenson, with whom he had by this time formed one of the closest of his friendships. Stevenson's side of the correspondence has long been known, and it is one of the main attractions which Mr. Lubbock held out to his readers that Henry James's letters to Stevenson are now published. No episode of the literary history of the time is more fascinating than the interchange of feeling between these two great artists. The death of Stevenson, nine years later than their first meeting, though long anticipated, fell upon Henry James with a shock which he found at first scarcely endurable. For a long time afterwards he could not bring himself to mention the name of R. L. S. without a distressing agitation.

In 1886 the publication of *The Bostonians*, a novel which showed an advance in direct or, as it was then styled, "realistic" painting of modern society, increased the cleft which now divided him from his native country, for *The Bostonians* was angrily regarded as satirizing not merely certain types, but certain recognizable figures in Massachusetts, and that with a suggestive daring which was unusual. Henry James, intent upon making a vivid picture, and already perhaps a little out of touch with American sentiment, was indignant at the reception of this book, which he ultimately, to my great disappointment, omitted from his Collected Edition, for reasons which he gave in a long letter to myself. Hence, as his works now appear, *The Princess Casamassima*, of 1886, an essentially London adventure story, takes its place as the earliest of the novels of his second period, although preceded by admirable short tales in that manner, the most characteristic of which is doubtless *The Author of*

*Beltraffio* (1885). This exemplifies the custom he had now adopted of seizing an incident reported to him, often a very slight and bald affair, and weaving round it a thick and glittering web of silken fancy, just as the worm winds round the unsightly chrysalis its graceful robe of gold. I speak of *The Author of Beltraffio*, and after thirty-five years I may confess that this extraordinarily vivid story was woven around a dark incident in the private life of an eminent author known to us both, which I, having told Henry James in a moment of levity, was presently horrified and even sensibly alarmed to see thus pinnacled in the broad light of day.

After exhausting at last the not very shining amenities of his lodgings in Bolton Street, where all was old and dingy, he went westward in 1886 into Kensington, and settled in a flat which was both new and bright, at 34 De Vere Gardens, Kensington, where he began a novel called *The Tragic Muse*, on which he expended an immense amount of pains. He was greatly wearied by the effort, and not entirely satisfied with the result. He determined, as he said, "to do nothing but short lengths" for the future, and he devoted himself to the execution of *contes*. But even the art of the short story presently yielded to a new and, it must be confessed, a deleterious fascination, that of the stage. He was disappointed – he made no secret to his friends of his disillusion – in the commercial success of his novels, which was inadequate to his needs. I believe that he greatly over-estimated these needs, and that at no time he was really pressed by the want of money. But he thought that he was, and in his anxiety he turned to the theatre as a market in which to earn a fortune. Little has hitherto been revealed with regard to this "sawdust and orange-peel phase" (as he called it) in Henry James's career, but it cannot be ignored any longer. The memories of his intimate friends are stored with its incidents, his letters will be found to be full of it.

Henry James wrote, between 1889 and 1894, seven or eight plays, on each of which he expended an infinitude of pains and mental distress. At the end of this period, unwillingly persuaded at last that all his agony was in vain, and that he could never secure fame and fortune, or even a patient hearing from the theatre-going public by his dramatic work, he abandoned the hopeless struggle. He was by temperament little fitted to endure the disappointments and delays which must always attend the course of a dramatist who has not conquered a position which enables him to browbeat the tyrants behind the stage. Henry James was punctilious, ceremonious, and precise; it is not to be denied that he was apt to be hasty in taking offence, and not very ready to overlook an impertinence. The whole existence of the actor is lax and casual; the manager is the capricious leader of an irresponsible band of egotists. Henry James lost no occasion of dwelling, in private conversation, on this aspect of an amiable and entertaining profession. He was not prepared to accept young actresses at their own valuation, and the happy-go-lucky democracy of the "mimes," as he bracketed both sexes, irritated him to the verge of frenzy.

It was, however, with a determination to curb his impatience, and with a conviction that he could submit his idiosyncrasies to what he called the "passionate economy" of play-writing, that he began, in 1889, to dedicate himself to the drama, excluding for the time being all other considerations. He went over to Paris in the winter of that year, largely to talk over the stage with Alphonse Daudet and Edmond de Goncourt, and he returned to put the finishing touches on *The American*, a dramatic version of one of his earliest novels. He finished this play at the Palazzo Barbaro, the beautiful home of his friends, the Daniel Curtises, in Venice, in June, 1890, thereupon taking a long holiday, one of the latest of his extended Italian tours, through Venetia and Tuscany. Edward Compton had by this time accepted *The American*, being attracted by his own chances in the part of Christopher Newman. When Henry James reappeared in London, and particularly when the rehearsals began, we all noticed how deeply the theatrical virus had penetrated his nature. His excitement swelled until the evening of January 3rd, 1891, when *The American* was acted at Southport by Compton's company in anticipation of its appearance in London. Henry James was kind enough to wish me to go down on this occasion with him to Southport, but it was not possible. On the afternoon of the ordeal he wrote to me from the local hotel: "After eleven o'clock to-night I may be the world's – you know –

and I may be the undertaker's. I count upon you and your wife both to spend this evening in fasting, silence, and supplication. I will send you a word in the morning, a wire if I can." He was "so nervous that I miswrite and misspell."

The result, in the provinces, of this first experiment was not decisive. It is true that he told Robert Louis Stevenson that he was enjoying a success which made him blush. But the final result in London, where *The American* was not played until September, 1891, was only partly encouraging. Henry James was now cast down as unreasonably as he had been uplifted. He told me that "the strain, the anxiety, the peculiar form and colour of the ordeal (not to be divined in the least in advance)" had "sickened him to death." He used language of the most picturesque extravagance about the "purgatory" of the performances, which ran at the Opera Comique for two months. There was nothing in the mediocre fortunes of this play to decide the questions whether Henry James was or was not justified in abandoning all other forms of art for the drama. We endeavoured to persuade him that, on the whole, he was not justified, but he swept our arguments aside, and he devoted himself wholly to the infatuation of his sterile task.

*The American* had been dramatized from a published novel. Henry James now thought that he should do better with original plots, and he wrote two comedies, the one named *Tenants* and the other *Disengaged*, of each of which he formed high expectations. But, although they were submitted to several managers, who gave them their customary loitering and fluctuating attention, they were in every case ultimately refused. Each refusal plunged the dramatist into the lowest pit of furious depression, from which he presently emerged with freshly-kindled hopes. Like the moralist, he never was but always to be blest. *The Album* and *The Reprobate*—there is a melancholy satisfaction in giving life to the mere names of these stillborn children of his brain—started with wild hopes and suffered from the same complete failure to satisfy the caprice of the managers. At the close of 1893, after one of these "sordid developments," he made up his mind to abandon the struggle. But George Alexander promised that, if he would but persevere, he really and truly would produce him infallibly at no distant date, and poor Henry James could not but persevere. "I mean to wage this war ferociously for one year more," and he composed, with infinite agony and deliberation, the comedy of *Guy Domville*.

The night of January 5th, 1895, was the most tragical in Henry James's career. His hopes and fears had been strung up to the most excruciating point, and I think that I have never witnessed such agonies of parturition. *Guy Domville*—which has never been printed—was a delicate and picturesque play, of which the only disadvantage that I could discover was that instead of having a last scene which tied up all the threads in a neat conclusion, it left all those threads loose as they would be in life. George Alexander was sanguine of success, and to do Henry James honour such a galaxy of artistic, literary, and scientific celebrity gathered in the stalls of the St. James's Theatre as perhaps were never seen in a London playhouse before or since. Henry James was positively storm-ridden with emotion before the fatal night, and full of fantastic plans. I recall that one was that he should hide in the bar of a little public-house down an alley close to the theatre, whither I should slip forth at the end of the second act and report "how it was going." This was not carried out, and fortunately Henry James resisted the temptation of being present in the theatre during the performance. All seemed to be going fairly well until the close, when Henry James appeared and was called before the curtain—only to be subjected—to our unspeakable horror and shame—to a storm of hoots and jeers and catcalls from the gallery, answered by loud and sustained applause from the stalls, the whole producing an effect of hell broke loose, in the midst of which the author, as white as chalk, bowed and spread forth deprecating hands and finally vanished. It was said at the time, and confirmed later, that this horrible performance was not intended to humiliate Henry James, but was the result of a cabal against George Alexander.

Early next morning I called at 34 De Vere Gardens, hardly daring to press the bell for fear of the worst of news, so shattered with excitement had the playwright been on the previous evening. I was astonished to find him perfectly calm; he had slept well and was breakfasting with appetite. The theatrical bubble in which he had lived a tormented existence for five years was wholly and finally

broken, and he returned, even in that earliest conversation, to the discussion of the work which he had so long and so sadly neglected, the art of direct prose narrative. And now a remarkable thing happened. The discipline of toiling for the caprices of the theatre had amounted, for so redundant an imaginative writer, to the putting on of a mental strait-jacket. He saw now that he need stoop no longer to what he called "a meek and lowly review of the right ways to keep on the right side of a body of people who have paid money to be amused at a particular hour and place." Henry James was not released from this system of vigorous renunciation without a very singular result. To write for the theatre the qualities of brevity and directness, of an elaborate plainness, had been perceived by him to be absolutely necessary, and he had tried to cultivate them with dogged patience for five years. But when he broke with the theatre, the rebound was excessive. I recall his saying to me, after the fiasco of *Guy Domville*, "At all events, I have escaped for ever from the foul fiend Excision!" He vibrated with the sense of release, and he began to enjoy, physically and intellectually, a freedom which had hitherto been foreign to his nature.

## II

THE abrupt change in Henry James's outlook on life, which was the result of his violent disillusion with regard to theatrical hopes and ambitions, took the form of a distaste for London and a determination, vague enough at first, to breathe for the future in a home of his own by the sea. He thought of Bournemouth, more definitely of Torquay, but finally his fate was sealed by his being offered, for the early summer months of 1896, a small house on the cliff at Point Hill, Playden, whence he could look down, as from an "eagle's nest," on the exquisite little red-roofed town of Rye and over the wide floor of the marsh of Sussex. When the time came for his being turned out of this retreat, he positively could not face the problem of returning to the breathless heat of London in August, and he secured the Vicarage in the heart of Rye itself for two months more. Here, as earlier at Point Hill, I was his guest, and it was wonderful to observe how his whole moral and intellectual nature seemed to burgeon and expand in the new and delicious liberty of country life. We were incessantly in the open air, on the terrace (for the Vicarage, though musty and dim, possessed, like the fresher Point Hill, a sea-looking terrace), sauntering round the little town, or roving for miles and miles over the illimitable flats, to Winchelsea, to Lydd, to the recesses of Walland Marsh – even, on one peerless occasion, so far afield as to Midley Chapel and the Romneys.

Never had I known Henry James so radiant, so cheerful or so self-assured. During the earlier London years there had hung over him a sort of canopy, a mixture of reserve and deprecation, faintly darkening the fullness of communion with his character; there always had seemed to be something indefinably non-conductive between him and those in whom he had most confidence. While the play-writing fit was on him this had deepened almost into fretfulness; the complete freedom of intercourse which is the charm of friendship had been made more and more difficult by an excess of sensibility. Henry James had become almost what the French call a *buisson d'épines*. It was therefore surprising and highly delightful to find that this cloud had ceased to brood over him, and had floated away, leaving behind it a laughing azure in which quite a new and charming Henry James stood revealed. The summer of 1896, when by a succession of happy chances I was much alone with him at Rye, rests in my recollection as made exquisite by his serene and even playful uniformity of temper, by the removal of everything which had made intercourse occasionally difficult, and by the addition of forms of amenity that had scarcely been foreshadowed. On reflection, however, I find that I am mixing up memories of June at Point Hill and of September at the Vicarage with the final Rye adventure, which must now be chronicled. When he was obliged to turn out of his second refuge, he returned to London, but with an ever-deepening nostalgia for the little Sussex town where he had been happy. In the following summer the voice of Venice called him so loudly that he stayed in London longer than usual, meaning to spend the autumn and winter in Italy. He thought meanwhile of Bournemouth

and of Saxmundham. He went on his bicycle round the desolate ghost of Dunwich, but his heart was whispering "Rye" to him all the while. Nothing then seemed available, however, when suddenly the unexpected vacancy of the most eligible residence conceivable settled, in the course of a couple of days, the whole future earthly pilgrimage of Henry James. The huge fact was immediately announced in a letter of September 25th, 1897:

I am just drawing a long breath from having signed – a few moments since – a most portentous parchment: the lease of a smallish, charming, cheap old house in the country – down at Rye – for 21 years. (It was built about 1705.) It is exactly what I want and secretly and hopelessly coveted (since knowing it) without dreaming it would ever fall. But it has fallen – and has a beautiful room for you (the King's Room – George II's – who slept there); together with every promise of yielding me an indispensable retreat from May to October (every year). I hope you are not more sorry to take up the load of life that awaits, these days, the hunch of one's shoulders than I am. You'll ask me what I mean by "life." Come down to Lamb House and I'll tell you.

There were the most delightful possibilities in the property, which included a small garden and lawn, the whole hemmed in by a peaceful old red wall, plentifully tapestried with espaliers. The noble tower of Rye church looked down into it, and Henry James felt that the chimes sounded sweetly to him as he faced his garden in monastic quiet, the little market-town packed tightly about him, yet wholly out of sight.

Meanwhile the intellectual release had been none the less marked than the physical. The earliest result of his final escape from the lures of the Vivian of the stage had been the composition of a novel, *The Spoils of Poynton*, in a manner entirely different from that of his earlier long romances. This was published in 1897, and in the meantime he had set to work on a longer and more ambitious romance, *What Maisie Knew*. In these he began the exercise of what has been called his "later manner," which it would be out of proportion to attempt to define in a study which purports to be biographical rather than critical. It is enough to remind the reader familiar with Henry James's writings that in abandoning the more popular and conventional method of composition he aimed at nothing less than a revolution in the art of the novelist. While thus actively engaged in a new scheme of life, he found it more and more difficult to break "the spell of immobility" which enveloped him. He who had been so ready to start on any call of impulse in any direction found it impossible to bring himself to respond, at Christmas, 1897, to the appeal of Madame Alphonse Daudet to come over to Paris to grace the obsequies of her illustrious husband. The friends – and the author of *Jack* was the most intimate of James's Parisian acquaintances – had not met after 1895, when Daudet had spent a month in London mainly under the charge of Henry James, since which time the French novelist's life had been sapped and drained from him by a disease the symptoms of which were beginning to be painfully manifest when he was with us in London. The old French friends were now disappearing. Their places in Henry James's affection were partly filled by Paul Bourget and by Maurice Barrès, whose remarkable and rather "gruesome" book, *Les Déracinés*, now supplied James with an endless subject of talk and reflection.

The first novel actually completed at Lamb House was *The Awkward Age*, which was ready for the printers early in 1898. The ecstasy with which he settled down to appreciate his new surroundings is reflected in that novel, where the abode of Mr. Longdon is neither more nor less than a picture of Lamb House. It was a wonderful summer and autumn, and, as Henry James said: "The air of the place thrilled all the while with the bliss of birds, the hum of little lives unseen, and the flicker of white butterflies." The MS. of *The Awkward Age* was no sooner finished than he took up the germ of an incident dimly related to him years before at Addington, by Archbishop Benson, and wove it into *The Turn of the Screw*, a sort of moral (or immoral) ghost story which not a few readers consider to be

the most powerful of all his writings, and which others again peculiarly detest. I admit myself to be a hanger-on of the former group, and I have very vivid recollections of the period when *The Turn of the Screw* was being composed. The author discussed it with a freedom not usual with him. I remember that when he had finished it he said to me one day: "I had to correct the proofs of my ghost story last night, and when I had finished them I was so frightened that I was afraid to go upstairs to bed!"

By the close of 1898 he had got rid of the flat in De Vere Gardens, which had become a mere burden to him, and had taken what he called an "invaluable south-looking, Carlton-Gardens-sweeping bedroom" at the Reform Club in Pall Mall, which served his brief and sudden pilgrimages to town for many seasons. Lamb House, in the course of this year, became his almost exclusive residence, and it is to be noted that at the same time a remarkable change came over the nature of his correspondence. He had been a meticulous but not very inspired letter-writer in early youth; his capacity for epistolary composition and his appetite for it had developed remarkably in the middle years (1882-1890). During the hectic period of his theatrical ambition it had dwindled again. But when he settled finally at Rye, spreading himself in luxurious contentment within the protection of his old brick garden-wall, the pink and purple surface of which stood in his fancy as a sort of bodyguard of security passed down for that particular purpose through mild ages of restfulness, as soon as he sat, with his household gods about him, in the almost cotton-woolly hush of Lamb House, he began to blossom out into a correspondent of a new and splendid class. The finest and most characteristic letters of Henry James start with his fifty-fifth year, and they continue to expand in volume, in richness and in self-revelation almost to the close of his life. On this subject Mr. Percy Lubbock, than whom no one has known better the idiosyncrasies of Henry James, has described his method of correspondence in a passage which could not be bettered:

The rich apologies for silence and backwardness that preface so many of his letters must be interpreted in the light, partly indeed of his natural luxuriance of phraseology, but much more of his generous conception of the humblest correspondent's claim on him for response. He could not answer a brief note of friendliness but with pages of abounding eloquence. He never dealt in the mere small change of intercourse; the postcard and the half-sheet did not exist for him; a few lines of enquiry would bring from him a bulging packet of manuscript, overwhelming in its disproportion. No wonder that with this standard of the meaning of a letter he often groaned under his postal burden. He discharged himself of it, in general, very late at night; the morning's work left him too much exhausted for more composition until then. At midnight he would sit down to his letter-writing and cover sheet after sheet, sometimes for hours, with his dashing and not very readable script. Occasionally he would give up a day to the working off of arrears by dictation, seldom omitting to excuse himself to each correspondent in turn for the infliction of the "fierce legibility" of type.

This amplitude of correspondence was the outcome of an affectionate solicitude for his friends, which led him in another direction, namely, in that of exercising a hospitality towards them for which he had never found an opportunity before. He did not, however, choose to collect anything which might remotely be called "a party"; what he really preferred was the presence of a single friend at a time, of a companion who would look after himself in the morning, and be prepared for a stroll with his host in the afternoon, and for a banquet of untrammelled conversation under the lamp or on the expanse of the lawn after the comfortable descent of nightfall.

His practice in regard to such a visitor was always to descend to the railway station below the town to welcome the guest, who would instantly recognize his remarkable figure hurrying along the platform. Under the large soft hat would be visible the large pale face, anxiously scanning the carriage-windows and breaking into smiles of sunshine when the new-comer was discovered. Welcome was

signified by both hands waved aloft, lifting the skirts of the customary cloak, like wings. Then, luggage attended to, and the arm of the guest securely seized, as though even now there might be an attempt at escape, a slow ascent on foot would begin up the steep streets, the last and steepest of all leading to a discreet door which admitted directly to the broad hall of Lamb House. Within were, to right and left, the pleasant old rooms, with low windows opening straight into the garden, which was so sheltered and economized as to seem actually spacious. Further to the left was a lofty detached room, full of books and lights, where in summer Henry James usually wrote, secluded from all possible disturbance. The ascent of arrival from the railway grew to be more and more interesting as time went on, and as the novelist became more and more a familiar and respected citizen, it was much interrupted at last by bows from ladies and salaams from shop-keepers; many little boys and girls, the latter having often curtsied, had to be greeted and sometimes patted on the head. These social movements used to inspire in me the inquiry: "Well, how soon are you to be the Mayor-Elect of Rye?" a pleasantry which was always well received. So obviously did Henry James, in the process of years, become the leading inhabitant that it grew to seem no impossibility. Stranger things had happened! No civic authority would have been more conscientious and few less efficient.

His outward appearance developed in accordance with his moral and intellectual expansion. I have said that in early life Henry James was not "impressive"; as time went on his appearance became, on the contrary, excessively noticeable and arresting. He removed the beard which had long disguised his face, and so revealed the strong lines of mouth and chin, which responded to the majesty of the skull. In the breadth and smoothness of the head – Henry James became almost wholly bald early in life – there was at length something sacerdotal. As time went on, he grew less and less Anglo-Saxon in appearance and more Latin. I remember once seeing a Canon preaching in the Cathedral of Toulouse who was the picture of Henry James in his unction, his gravity, and his vehemence. Sometimes there could be noted – what Henry would have hated to think existing – a theatrical look which struck the eye, as though he might be some retired *jeune premier* of the Français, *jeune* no longer; and often the prelatial expression faded into a fleeting likeness to one or other celebrated Frenchman of letters (never to any Englishman or American), somewhat of Lacordaire in the intolerable scrutiny of the eyes, somewhat of Sainte-Beuve, too, in all except the mouth, which, though mobile and elastic, gave the impression in rest of being small. All these comparisons and suggestions, however, must be taken as the barest hints, intended to mark the tendency of Henry James's radically powerful and unique outer appearance. The beautiful modelling of the brows, waxing and waning under the stress of excitement, is a point which singularly dwells in the memory.

It is very difficult to give an impression of his manner, which was complex in the extreme, now restrained with a deep reserve, now suddenly expanding, so as to leave the auditor breathless, into a flood of exuberance. He had the habit of keeping his friends apart from one another; his intimacies were contained in many watertight compartments. He disliked to think that he was the subject of an interchange of impressions, and though he who discussed everybody and everything with the most penetrating and analysing curiosity must have known perfectly well that he also, in his turn, was the theme of endless discussion, he liked to ignore it and to feign to be a bodiless spectator. Accordingly, he was not apt to pay for the revelations, confidences, guesses and what not which he so eagerly demanded and enjoyed by any coin of a similar species. He begged the human race to plunge into experiences, but he proposed to take no plunge himself, or at least to have no audience when he plunged.

So discreet was he, and so like a fountain sealed, that many of those who were well acquainted with him have supposed that he was mainly a creature of observation and fancy, and that life stirred his intellect while leaving his senses untouched. But every now and then he disclosed to a friend, or rather admitted such a friend to a flash or glimpse of deeper things. The glimpse was never prolonged or illuminated, it was like peering down for a moment through some chasm in the rocks dimmed by the vapour of a clash of waves. One such flash will always leave my memory dazzled. I was staying



alone with Henry James at Rye one summer, and as twilight deepened we walked together in the garden. I forget by what meanders we approached the subject, but I suddenly found that in profuse and enigmatic language he was recounting to me an experience, something that had happened, not something repeated or imagined. He spoke of standing on the pavement of a city, in the dusk, and of gazing upwards across the misty street, watching, watching for the lighting of a lamp in a window on the third storey. And the lamp blazed out, and through bursting tears he strained to see what was behind it, the unapproachable face. And for hours he stood there, wet with the rain, brushed by the phantom hurrying figures of the scene, and never from behind the lamp was for one moment visible the face. The mysterious and poignant revelation closed, and one could make no comment, ask no question, being throttled oneself by an overpowering emotion. And for a long time Henry James shuffled beside me in the darkness, shaking the dew off the laurels, and still there was no sound at all in the garden but what our heels made crunching the gravel, nor was the silence broken when suddenly we entered the house and he disappeared for an hour.

But the gossamer thread of narrative must be picked up once more, slight as it is. Into so cloistered a life the news of the sudden loss of Edward Burne-Jones in June, 1898, fell with a sensation; he had "seen the dear man, to my great joy, only a few hours before his death." In the early spring of the next year Henry James actually summoned resolution to go abroad again, visiting at Hyères Paul Bourget and the Vicomte Melchior de Vogüé (of whose *Le Roman Russe* and other essays he was a sturdy admirer), and proceeding to Rome, whence he was "whirled by irresistible Marion Crawford off to Sorrento, Capri, Naples," some of these now seen for the first time. He came back to England and to Lamb House at the end of June, to find that his novel of *The Awkward Age*, which was just published, was being received with a little more intelligence and sympathetic comprehension than had been the habit of greeting his productions, what he haughtily, but quite justly, called "the lurid asininity" of the Press in his regard now beginning to be sensibly affected by the loyalty of the little clan of those who saw what he was "driving at" in the new romances, and who valued it as a pearl of price. Nevertheless, there was still enough thick-witted denunciation of his novels to fill his own "clan" with anger, while some even of those who loved him best admitted themselves bewildered by *The Awkward Age*. Nothing is more steadily cleared away by time than the impression of obscurity that hangs over a really fine work of imagination when it is new. Twenty years have now passed, and no candid reader any longer pretends to find this admirable story "bewildering."

The passing of old friends was partly healed by the coming of new friends, and it was about this time that Mr. H. G. Wells, Mr. Rudyard Kipling, and Mr. W. E. Norris began to be visited and corresponded with. In 1900 and 1901 Henry James was slowly engaged, with luxurious throes of prolonged composition, in dictating *The Ambassadors*, which he "tackled and, for various reasons, laid aside," only to attack it again "with intensity and on the basis of a simplification that made it easier" until he brought it successfully through its voluminous career. In the summer of 1902 Mrs. Wharton, who had dedicated to him, as a stranger, her novel of *The Valley of Decision*, became a personal acquaintance, and soon, and till the end, one of the most valued and intimate of his friends. This event synchronized with the publication of his own great book, *The Wings of a Dove*. It was followed by *The Golden Bowl*. He now turned from such huge schemes as this – which in his fatigue he described as "too inordinately drawn out and too inordinately rubbed in" – to the composition of short stories, in which he found both rest and refreshment.

On this subject, the capabilities of the *conte* as a form of peculiarly polished and finished literature, he regaled me – and doubtless other friends – at this time with priceless observations. I recall a radiant August afternoon when we sallied from his high abode and descended to the mud of the winding waters of the Brede, where, on the shaky bridge across the river, leaning perilously above the flood, Henry James held forth on the extraordinary skill of Guy de Maupassant, whose posthumous collection, *Le Colporteur*, had just reached him, and on the importance of securing, as that inimitable artist so constantly secured, one straight, intelligible action which must be the source of all vitality in

what, without it, became a mere wandering anecdote, more or less vaguely ornamented. Henry James was at this time, I think, himself engaged upon the series of short stories which ultimately appeared under the title of *The Better Sort*, each one, as he said, being the exhibition of a case of experience or conduct. He collected and published in these years several such volumes of short compositions, in which he endeavoured, and admirably effected his endeavour, to combine neatness of handling with that beauty of conception which became more and more the object of his passionate desire. The reader naturally recalls such perfect specimens of his craft as *The Real Right Thing* and *The Beast in the Jungle*.

For many years he had let his fancy toy with the idea of returning, on a visit only, to America. In 1904 this project really took shape, and the long-debated journey actually took place. He terminated another extended romance, *The Golden Bowl*, and in August set sail for New York, ostensibly for the purpose of writing a book of American impressions. The volume called *The American Scene*, published in 1906, gives his account of the adventure, or rather of certain parts of it. He lived through the first autumn with his family in the mountains of New Hampshire, and, after a sojourn in Cambridge, spent Christmas in New York. He then went south in search of warmth, which he found at last in Florida. By way of Chicago, St. Louis, and Indianapolis he reached California in April, 1905. He delivered in various American Colleges two lectures, specially written for the purpose, which came out as a little volume in the United States, but have not yet appeared in England. His impressions of America, in the volume which he published after his return, stop with Florida, and give therefore no record of the extreme pleasure which he experienced in California, of which his private letters were full. He declared, writing on April 5th, 1905, from Coronado Beach, that "California has completely bowled me over... The flowers, the wild flowers, just now in particular, which fairly *rage* with radiance over the land, are worthy of some purer planet than this... It breaks my heart to have so stinted myself here"; but return eastward was imperative, and in August, 1905, he was back again safe in the silence of Lamb House.

Throughout the following autumn and winter he was, as he said, "squeezing out" his American impressions, which did not flow so easily as he had hoped they would. Many other enterprises hung temptingly before him, and distracted his thoughts from that particular occupation. Moreover, just before his plan for visiting the United States had taken shape, he had promised to write for a leading firm of English publishers "a romantical-psychological-pictorial-social" book about London, and in November, 1905, he returned to this project with vivacity. There is a peculiar interest about works that great writers mean to compose and never succeed in producing, and this scheme of a great picturesque book about London is like a ghost among the realities of Henry James's invention. He spoke about it more often and more freely than he did about his solid creations; I feel as though I had handled and almost as though I had read it. Westminster was to have been the core of the matter, which was to circle out concentrically to the City and the suburbs. Henry James put me under gratified contribution by coming frequently to the House of Lords in quest of "local colour," and I took him through the corridors and up into garrets of the Palace where never foreign foot had stepped before. There was not, to make a clean breast of it, much "local colour" to be wrung out, but Henry James was indefatigable in curiosity. What really did thrill him was to stand looking down from one of the windows of the Library on the Terrace, crowded with its motley afternoon crew of Members of both Houses and their guests of both sexes. He liked that better than to mingle with the throng itself, and he should have written a superb page on the scene, with its background of shining river and misty towers. Alas! it will not be read until we know what songs the Sirens sang.

All through the quiet autumn and winter of 1906 he was busy preparing the collective and definite, but far from complete, edition of his novels and tales which began to appear some twelve months later. This involved a labour which some of his friends ventured to disapprove of, since it included a re-writing into his latest style of the early stories which possessed a charm in their unaffected immaturity. Henry James was conscious, I think, of the arguments which might be brought

against this reckless revision, but he rejected them with violence. I was spending a day or two with him at Lamb House when *Roderick Hudson* was undergoing, or rather had just undergone, the terrible trial; so the revised copy, darkened and swelled with MS. alterations, was put into my hands. I thought – I dare say I was quite mistaken – that the whole perspective of Henry James's work, the evidence of his development and evolution, his historical growth, were confused and belied by this wholesale tampering with the original text. Accordingly I exclaimed against such dribbling of new wine into the old bottles. This was after dinner, as we sat alone in the garden-room. All that Henry James – though I confess, with a darkened countenance – said at the time was, "The only alternative would have been to put the vile thing" – that is to say the graceful tale of *Roderick Hudson* – "behind the fire and have done with it!" Then we passed to other subjects, and at length we parted for the night in unruffled cheerfulness. But what was my dismay, on reaching the breakfast-table next morning, to see my host sombre and taciturn, with gloom thrown across his frowning features like a veil. I inquired rather anxiously whether he had slept well. "Slept!" he answered with dreary emphasis. "Was I likely to sleep when my brain was tortured with all the cruel and – to put it plainly to you – monstrous insinuations which you had brought forward against my proper, my necessary, my absolutely inevitable corrections of the disgraceful and disreputable style of *Roderick Hudson*?" I withered, like a guilty thing ashamed, before the eyes that glared at me over the coffee-pot, and I inly resolved that not one word of question should ever escape my lips on this subject again.

Early in 1907 he was tempted once more, after so long absence, to revisit France. While in America he had acquired the habit of motoring, which he learned to enjoy so much that it became the greatest physical pleasure of his life, and one which seemed definitely to benefit his health. He motored through a great part of France, and then proceeded to his beloved Italy, where he spent some radiant summer days under the pines near Vallombrosa, and later some more with his lifelong friend Mrs. Curtis in her wonderful Palazzo Barbaro in Venice. Ten weeks in Paris must be added to the foreign record of this year, almost the last of those which Henry James was able to dedicate to the Latin world that he loved so well and comprehended so acutely. The "nightmare," as he called it, of his Collected Edition kept him closely engaged for months after his return – it ultimately ran into a range of twenty-four volumes – but he was also sketching a novel, *The Ivory Tower*, which was to embody some of his American recollections; this was never finished. He met new friends of the younger generation, such as Hugh Walpole and Rupert Brooke, and they gave him great happiness.

He seemed to be approaching old age in placidity and satisfaction when, towards the end of 1909, he was seized by a mysterious group of illnesses which "deprived him of all power to work and caused him immeasurable suffering of mind." Unfortunately his beloved brother William was also failing in health, and had come to Europe in the vain search for recovery; their conditions painfully interacted. The whole year 1910 was one of almost unmitigated distress. Henry accompanied Mr. and Mrs. William back to their home in New Hampshire, where in the autumn not only the eminent philosopher, but a third brother, Robertson James, died, leaving Henry solitary indeed, and weighed upon by a cloud of melancholy which forbade him to write or almost to speak. Out of this he passed in the spring of 1911, and returned to Lamb House, where he had another sharp attack of illness in the autumn of 1912. It was now felt that the long pale winters over the marsh at Rye were impossible for him, and the bedroom at the Reform Club insufficient. He therefore rented a small flat high up over the Thames in Cheyne Walk, where he was henceforth to spend half of each year and die. He sat, on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, to Mr. Sargent for the picture which is now one of the treasures of the National Portrait Gallery; this was surprisingly mutilated, while being exhibited at the Royal Academy, by a "militant suffragette"; Henry James was extraordinarily exhilarated by having been thus "impaired by the tomahawk of the savage," and displayed himself as "breasting a wondrous high-tide of postal condolence in this doubly-damaged state." This was his latest excitement before the war with Germany drowned every other consideration.

The record of the last months of Henry James's life is told in the wonderful letters that he wrote between the beginning of August, 1914, and the close of November, 1915. He was at Rye when the war broke out, but he found it absolutely impossible to stay there without daily communication with friends in person, and, contrary to his lifelong habit, he came posting up to London in the midst of the burning August weather. He was transfigured by the events of those early weeks, overpowered, and yet, in his vast and generous excitement, himself overpowering. He threw off all the languor and melancholy of the recent years, and he appeared actually grown in size as he stalked the streets, amazingly moved by the unexpected nightmare, "the huge horror of blackness" which he saw before him. "The plunge of civilization into the abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton feat of these two infamous autocrats" made him suddenly realize that the quiet years of prosperity which had preceded 1914 had been really, as he put it, "treacherous," and that their perfidy had left us unprotected against the tragic terrors which now faced our world. It was astonishing how great Henry James suddenly seemed to become; he positively loomed above us in his splendid and disinterested faith. His first instinct had been horror at the prospect; his second anger and indignation against the criminals; but to these succeeded a passion of love and sympathy for England and France, and an unyielding but anxious and straining confidence in their ultimate success. Nothing could express this better than the language of a friend who saw him constantly and studied his moods with penetrating sympathy. Mr. Percy Lubbock says:

To all who listened to him in those days it must have seemed that he gave us what we lacked – a voice; there was a trumpet note in it that was heard nowhere else and that alone rose to the height of the truth.

The impression Henry James gave in these first months of the war could not be reproduced in better terms. To be in his company was to be encouraged, stimulated and yet filled with a sense of the almost intolerable gravity of the situation; it was to be moved with that "trumpet note" in his voice, as the men fighting in the dark defiles of Roncevaux were moved by the sound of the oliphant of Roland. He drew a long breath of relief in the thought that England had not failed in her manifest duty to France, nor "shirked any one of the implications of the Entente." When, as at the end of the first month, things were far from exhilarating for the Allies, Henry James did not give way to despair, but he went back to Rye, possessing his soul in waiting patience, "bracing himself unutterably," as he put it, "and holding on somehow (though to God knows what!) in presence of the perpetrations so gratuitously and infamously hideous as the destruction of Louvain and its accompaniments."

At Lamb House he sat through that gorgeous tawny September, listening to the German guns thundering just across the Channel, while the advance of the enemy through those beautiful lands which he knew and loved so well filled him with anguish. He used to sally forth and stand on the bastions of his little town, gazing over the dim marsh that became sand-dunes, and then sea, and then a mirage of the white cliffs of French Flanders that were actually visible when the atmosphere grew transparent. The anguish of his execration became almost the howl of some animal, of a lion of the forest with the arrow in his flank, when the Germans wrecked Reims Cathedral. He gazed and gazed over the sea south-east, and fancied that he saw the flicker of the flames. He ate and drank, he talked and walked and thought, he slept and waked and lived and breathed only the War. His friends grew anxious, the tension was beyond what his natural powers, transfigured as they were, could be expected to endure, and he was persuaded to come back to Chelsea, although a semblance of summer still made Rye attractive.

During this time his attitude towards America was marked by a peculiar delicacy. His letters expressed no upbraiding, but a yearning, restrained impatience that took the form of a constant celebration of the attitude of England, which he found in those early months consistently admirable. In his abundant and eloquent letters to America he dealt incessantly on the shining light which events were throwing on "England's moral position and attitude, her predominantly incurable good-nature,

the sublimity or the egregious folly, one scarcely knows which to call it, of her innocence in face of the most prodigiously massed and worked-out intentions of aggression." He admitted, with every gesture of courtesy, that America's absence from the feast of allied friendship on an occasion so unexampled, so infinitely momentous, was a bitter grief to him, but he was ready to believe it a necessity. For his own part, almost immediately on his return to London in October, 1914, Henry James began to relieve the mental high pressure by some kinds of practical work for which nothing in his previous life had fitted him, but into which he now threw himself with even exhausting ardour. He had always shrunk from physical contact with miscellaneous strangers, but now nothing seemed unwelcome save aloofness which would have divided him from the sufferings of others. The sad fate of Belgium particularly moved him, and he found close to his flat in Cheyne Walk a centre for the relief of Belgian refugees, and he was active in service there. A little later on he ardently espoused the work of the American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps. His practical experiences and his anxiety to take part in the great English movement for relief of the Belgians and the French are reflected in the essays which were collected in 1919 under the title of *Within the Rim*.

We were, however, made anxious by the effect of all this upon his nerves. The magnificent exaltation of spirit which made him a trumpeter in the sacred progress of the Allies was of a nature to alarm us as much as it inspirited and rejoiced us. When we thought of what he had been in 1911, how sadly he had aged in 1912, it was not credible that in 1915 he could endure to be filled to overflowing by this tide of febrile enthusiasm. Some of us, in the hope of diverting his thoughts a little from the obsession of the war, urged him to return to his proper work; and he responded in part to our observations, while not abandoning his charitable service. He was at work on *The Ivory Tower* when the war began, but he could not recover the note of placidity which it demanded, and he abandoned it in favour of a novel begun in 1900 and then laid aside, *The Sense of the Past*. He continued, at the same time, his reminiscences, and was writing the fragment published since his death as *The Middle Years*. But all this work was forced from him with an effort, very slowly; the old sprightly running of composition was at an end, the fact being that his thoughts were now incessantly distracted by considerations of a far more serious order.

The hesitations of Mr. Wilson, and Henry James's conviction that in the spring of 1915 the United States government was "sitting down in meekness and silence under the German repudiation of every engagement she solemnly took with" America, led to his taking a step which he felt to be in many respects painful, but absolutely inevitable. His heart was so passionately united with England in her colossal effort, and he was so dismally discouraged by the unending hesitation of America, that he determined to do what he had always strenuously refused to do before, namely, apply for British naturalization. Mr. Asquith (then Prime Minister), Sir George Prothero (the Editor of the *Quarterly Review*), and I had the honour and the gratification of being chosen his sponsors. In the case of so illustrious a claimant the usual formalities were passed over, and on July 26th, 1915, Henry James became a British subject. Unhappily he did not live to see America join the Allies, and so missed the joy for which he longed above all others.

But his radiant enthusiasm was burning him out. In August he had a slight breakdown, and his autumn was made miserable by an affection of the heart. He felt, he said, twenty years older, but "still, I cultivate, I at least attempt, a brazen front." He still got about, and I saw him at Westminster on the evening of November 29th. This was, I believe, the last time he went out, and two days later, on the night between the 1st and the 2nd of December, he had a stroke. He partly rallied and was able to receive comfort from the presence of his sister-in-law, Mrs. William James, who hurried across the Atlantic to nurse him. At the New Year he was awarded the highest honour which the King can confer on a British man of letters, the Order of Merit, the insignia of which were brought to his bedside by Lord Bryce. On February 28th, 1916, he died, within two months of his 73rd birthday. His body was cremated, and the funeral service held at that "altar of the dead" which he had loved so much, Chelsea Old Church, a few yards from his own door.

*1920.*

## SAMUEL BUTLER

LET it be said at once that Mr. Henry Festing Jones's *Life of Samuel Butler* tells the history of a very remarkable man with a vividness which leaves nothing to be desired. This is not a vain compliment; it is a tribute which common justice demands on an unusual occasion. There were ninety-nine chances in a hundred that Butler's life would never be adequately, or even intelligently, recorded. Nature and circumstance had done their best to make him obscure and incomprehensible. The situation has been saved by two facts: the first, that Butler was excessively interested in himself; the second, that Mr. Jones was always – not merely since Butler's death, but always – excessively interested in Butler. These are not conditions which are essential to the success of biography in every case, especially when the general unanimity of admiration has made all the contemporaries of a great man in some sort his biographers, but they are absolutely required to preserve for us the features of an eccentric and isolated person who failed almost all through his life to attract admiration, and who laid himself out to be completely misunderstood when the tide should at last turn in his favour. We are preserved from such a loss by the meticulous attention which Samuel Butler paid to himself, and by the infatuated zeal with which Mr. Jones adopted, continued, and developed that attention. Butler lives twice over, or rather has never ceased to live, in the mind and humour of Mr. Henry Festing Jones.

We move in an age which prides itself more and more on being able to see the mote in the eye of its immediate predecessor. But Samuel Butler was the precursor of this rebellion, and is historically notable as the earliest anti-Victorian. He was born at a moment which was to prove less rich than almost any other of the remarkable nineteenth century, in producing men who were to be eminent for intellectual talent. It almost looks as though Nature, which had been so profuse, and was presently to become so liberal again, paused for a few years, while she prepared to let the Victorian Age proper wear itself out. The immediate contemporaries of Butler were Shorthouse, whose *John Inglesant* started a new sentimentality, and William Morris, who combined a fresh aspect of romance with an investigation of the bases of society which was essentially revolutionary; with these were T. H. Green, who introduced a new Hegelian spirit into philosophical speculation, and John Richard Green, who re-examined the foundations of our history. But none of these men displayed any real parallelism with Butler, by whose work they were none of them at any time affected, and of whom perhaps none of them ever heard. The only other name which can be quoted in this connexion is that of Lecky, who may indeed be regarded as the exact opposite of Butler in almost every respect – successful from earliest youth, at peace with the world, reverently acceptive of every Victorian formula, and blandly unconscious that everything was not permanently for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

Butler is a curious example of a man of something very like genius, who passed through a long life in the midst of intelligent fellow-men, not rebuffing their attentions, but encouraging them; not escaping by a morbid modesty from criticism, but doing everything in his power to exasperate it; and yet failing to be observed. The strange thing about his case is that he lived, mostly in London, for sixty-six years, and that until nearly the close of that time scarcely anyone felt more than the most tepid and casual curiosity about him. The only similar case that occurs to the memory in the history of nineteenth-century literature is Borrow, who in like manner, but not with a like desolating completeness, simply was unable to catch the eye of criticism. When each of these writers died, it seemed impossible that either of them would ever occupy half a page in any history of literature. It now seems equally difficult to suppose that any such history, if possessing the least pretension to completeness, will in future omit either of them. This is quite apart from any question which may present itself as to the probability of a decline in the present "fashion" for them both. It merely expresses the fact that while Borrow and Butler alike walked all through their lives invisible, for the rest of time they must both be patent, whether liked or disliked.

Borrow affected a certain disdain for the laudation which would not come his way, and in later life seemed to have relinquished any desire to move in the mouths of men. But Butler never ceased to long for fame, and probably to expect it. Towards the close of his life, whenever he was asked what new work might be expected from his ingenious pen, he used to look demure and answer, "I am editing my remains; I wish 'to leave everything in order for my executors.'" This was looked upon as a joke, but it turns out to have been strictly true. No one ever laboured more to appear at his best – in strict accordance with truth, but still, at his best – to the world after his decease. His assiduities were like those of the dying Narcissa —

And Betty, give those cheeks a little red,  
One wouldn't, sure, look horrid when one's dead!

He recovered as many of his own letters as he could and annotated them; he arranged the letters of his friends; he copied, edited, indexed, and dated all this mass of correspondence, and he prepared those "Notes" which have since his death provided his admirers with their choicest repast. In doing all this he displayed an equal *naïveté* and enthusiasm. Mr. Festing Jones, to whom all this industry has of course been invaluable, puts the matter in a nutshell when he says that Butler "was not contemplating publication, but neither was he contemplating oblivion." He was simply putting the rouge-pot within Betty's reach.

Here is Butler's own account of the matter, and it throws a strong light upon his character:

People sometimes give me to understand that it is a piece of ridiculous conceit on my part to jot down so many notes about myself, since it implies a confidence that I shall one day be regarded as an interesting person. I answer that neither I nor they can form any idea as to whether I shall be wanted when I am gone or no. The chances are that I shall not.

But he was not inclined to take any risks. He was the residuary of his own temperament, and if by chance posterity were to wake up and take a violent interest in him, he personally would be to blame, and would incur a very serious responsibility, if there were no documents forthcoming to satisfy the curiosity of the new generation. It is to his frank response to this instinct of self-preservation that we owe the very exhaustive and faithful narrative of Mr. Festing Jones, as we did the precious "Note-books" of 1912.

In consideration of the eagerness and sympathy with which Butler is followed by an active group of admirers among the young writers of to-day, it may be doubtful whether the extraordinary minuteness of Butler's observation, continued as it is with an equally extraordinary fullness by his biographer, may not have an evil effect in encouraging a taste for excessive discursiveness in authorship of this class. There have been very distinguished examples lately of abandonment to an unchecked notation of detail. It is scarcely necessary to refer to the texture of the later novels of Henry James, or to the amazing *Côté de chez Swann* of M. Marcel Proust, which latter is one of the most characteristic successes of the moment. This widespread tendency to consider every slight observation, whether phenomenal or emotional, worthy of the gravest and tenderest analysis, develops at an epoch when the world is becoming congested with printed matter, and when one might imagine that conciseness and selection would be the qualities naturally in fashion. Neither Samuel Butler nor his biographer conceives it possible that anything can be negligible; to them the meanest flower that blows by the wayside of experience gives thoughts that cannot be brought to lie within one or even within ten pages. The complacency with which Butler annotates his own childish letters to his mother is equalled only by the gravity with which Mr. Jones examines those very annotations.

Not without a qualm, however, do I note this redundancy, since it is a source of pleasure to all but the hasty reader, who, indeed, should be advised not to approach Butler at all. The charm



of his mind lies in its divagations, its inconsistencies, its puerile and lovable self-revelations, and all these are encouraged by the wandering style common to the author and to his biographer. One of the most clear-sighted of his friends, trying to sum up his character at his death, said that "he was too versatile a genius ever to be in the front rank of one particular line, and he had too much fun in him to be really serious when he ought to have been." But why ought he to have been "really serious," and why should he have sought "front rank" in one particular line? This is the inevitable way in which a man of ingenious originality is misjudged by those who have loved him most and who think they understood him best. Butler was not remarkable, and does not now deserve the reputation which his name enjoys, on account of the subjects about which he chose to write, nor on account of the measure of decorum with which he approached those themes, but in consequence of the sinuous charm, the irregular and arresting originality of his approach itself, his fame having been indeed rather delayed, and the purgatory of his obscurity prolonged, by the want of harmony between most of the subjects he selected and the manner in which it was native to himself to treat those subjects. In other words, what makes Butler a difficult theme for analysis is that, unlike most authors, his genius is not illuminated, but positively obscured for a student of to-day, by the majority of his controversial writings. He was not a prophet; he was an inspired "crank." He is most characteristic, not when he is discussing Evolution, or Christianity, or the Sonnets of Shakespeare, or the Trapanese Origin of the "Odyssey," but when he is meandering along, endlessly, paradoxically, in the act of written conversation about everything at large and nothing in particular, with himself as the central theme.

The most valuable of Butler's imaginative writings, and indeed the most important from almost every point of view, are the two romances which stand respectively at the opening and at the close of his career, like two golden pillars supporting the roof of his reputation. His earliest publication (for the slight and brief budget of letters from New Zealand was not published by himself) was *Erewhon* – or "Nowhere" – a fantastic Utopia of the class started a century and a half ago by Paltock in his fascinating adventures of *Peter Wilkins*. Like Wilkins, the hero of *Erewhon* flies from civilization, and discovers in the Antarctic world a race of semi-human beings, who obey a strict code of morals consistent in itself, but in complete divergence from ours on many important points. I discover no evidence that Butler ever saw Paltock's romance, and he would probably have been scornful of the Glums and Gowries, and of the gentle winged people wrapped in throbbing robes of their own substance. But I think some dim report of an undiscovered country where ethics were all turned topsy-turvy may have started him on *Erewhon*. The other novel, that which closes Butler's career as a writer, is *The Way of All Flesh*, without a careful consideration of which, by the light of information now supplied by Mr. Festing Jones, no sketch of Butler's career can, for the future, be attempted.

As early as 1873, Butler confided to Miss Savage – of whose place in his life and influence upon his genius I shall presently have to speak – that he was contemplating the composition of an autobiographical novel. She read the opening, and wrote, "as far as it goes it is perfect, and if you go on as you have begun, it will be a beautiful book." In case he got tired of it, what he had already written might make "a very nice finished sketch for a magazine." Evidently Miss Savage, who had an almost uncanny penetration into Butler's nature, had little confidence in his perseverance in the conduct of so large a design. She urged him on, however, and it very early occurred to her that the value of the story would consist in its complete veracity as an autobiography. She faced Butler with the charge that he was not being faithful to himself in this matter, and she said, "Is the narrator of the story to be an impartial historian or a special pleader?" Butler wriggled under her strictures, but failed to escape from them. Finally she faced him with a direct question:

You have chosen the disguise of an old man of seventy-three [exactly double Butler's real age at that time], and must speak and act as such. An old man of seventy-three would scarcely talk as you do, unless he was constantly in your company, and

was a very docile old man indeed – and I don't think the old man who is telling the story is at all docile.

Young or old, Butler was never "docile," and he was not inclined to give up his idealism without a struggle. But Miss Savage was indomitable. She continued to undermine what she called "the special pleader," on the ground that "I prefer an advocate in flesh and blood." Under this pressure, and stimulated by Miss Savage's ingenuous annotations, Butler adopted more and more a realistic tone, and kept the story more and more closely on autobiographic lines. It was progressing steadily when Butler had to go to Canada on the business expedition which cost him so many months of his life, and when he returned to London he did not resume the novel. He took it up again in 1878, and disliked it; it needed Miss Savage's energy to start him again with proper gusto. Mr. Festing Jones was by this time upon the spot, and though he does not say so, he probably supported Miss Savage. They were the Aaron and Hur who held up the arms of this incorrigible "special pleader," and insisted that he should stick to the truth, and not embroider it. In 1884 *The Way of All Flesh* was finished; in 1885 it underwent some revision, and after that was not touched again.

So long as Butler was alive, the uncompromising revelations of his family life, and the bitterness of the censure of living persons, which the novel contained, made it impossible to dream of issuing it. To do so would have been to break a nest of hornets over Butler's pate. But the moment he was dead, his executor, the late Mr. R. A. Streatfeild, acting upon the author's known wishes, published *The Way of All Flesh*. This was in 1903, and the publication synchronized with the surprising burst of critical appreciation which the announcement of Butler's death had awakened in the Press. In almost all unprejudiced quarters the value of *The Way of All Flesh* as a sincere and masterly contribution to imaginative literature, was acknowledged, although it took five years more for a second edition of the book to be called for. Butler, however, was recognized at last as an author of distinguished merit, and there was a reverberation of curiosity concerning so remarkable a man who had walked about among us for nearly seventy years without attracting any particular attention. This curiosity, it was indicated by his admirers, could now be assuaged by a study of *The Way of All Flesh*, which was a faithful portrait of the writer, and of all the persons who had checked his growth or encouraged his development. So the legend was started that no real *Life of Samuel Butler* was required, because in *The Way of All Flesh* we already possessed a complete one.

Apart from the fact that the best of autobiographies can never be the "real life," because it can never depict the man quite as others saw him, it now transpires – and this is perhaps the most important feature of Mr. Festing Jones's admirable volumes – that the novel cannot be accepted as an autobiography sound at all points. In spite of the warnings of Miss Savage, and, oddly enough, most of all in the person of Miss Savage herself, Butler was incapable of confronting the incidents of his own life without colouring them, and without giving way to prejudice in the statement of plain facts. He disliked excessively the atmosphere of middle-class Evangelicism in which he had been brought up, and we must dislike it too, but we need not dislike the persons involved so bitterly as Butler did. It was narrow, sterile and cruel, and it deserved no doubt the irony which Butler expended upon it. So long as we regard *The Way of All Flesh* as a story, invented with the help of recollections which the novelist was at liberty to modify in any way he thought desirable, there is no quarrel to be picked with any part of it. But when we are led, as we have been, to take it as a full and true record of Butler's own life, with nothing changed but the names of the persons, we see by the light of Mr. Festing Jones that this is an absolutely untenable position. *The Way of All Flesh* is not an autobiography, but a romance founded on recollection.

The author of *Erewhon*, who was christened Samuel, not in honour of the author of *Hudibras*, but in memory of his own grandfather, the Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry, was the son of Canon Thomas Butler, incumbent of Langor-with-Branston, in Nottinghamshire, where the younger Samuel was born on the 4th of December, 1835. Readers of *The Way of All Flesh* may recognize the Butler family at Langor in the very unflattering picture of the Pontifexes in that novel. The Bishop's grandson

disliked him very much indeed – "bullying, irritable, stupid old turkey-cock" – until 1887, when he got hold of the Bishop's letters and papers, "and fell over head and ears in love with him." He excused his earlier sarcasms by saying – "When I wrote harshly describing him, I knew nothing about my grandfather except that he had been a great schoolmaster – and I do not like schoolmasters; and then a bishop – and I do not like bishops; and that he was supposed to be like my father." For the latter, who is Theobald Pontifex in *The Way of All Flesh*, he never expressed any leniency whatever, yet it is impossible to avoid hoping that if he had studied his father, as at the age of fifty he studied his grandfather, he might have relented a little in that instance also.

Ernest Pontifex says, in *The Way of All Flesh*, that he could remember no feeling towards his parents during his childhood except fear and shrinking. To Butler, fathers in general, as a class, were "capable de tout," like the prophet Habakkuk. Mr. Festing Jones prints a very explicit paper he has found on this subject, the least distressing paragraph in which is the last, where Butler says, "An unkind fate never threw two men together who were more naturally uncongenial than my father and myself." Canon Butler was an evangelical clergyman of the Simeonite type, which flourished so intensely before and during the development of the High Church revival. He believed in bringing up children rigidly, from their infancy, in the strict practice of external religion. If they were recalcitrant, the love of God must be driven into them by their being whipped or shut up in a cupboard, or docked of some little puerile pleasure. Samuel Butler secretly rebelled, from babyhood, against this stern evangelical discipline, and the Canon, who had no imagination, simply redoubled his severities. It is an amusing touch, in this record of a dismal childhood, to learn that Samuel was excessively pleased, at the age of eight, by hearing an Italian lady in Naples say that a dear young friend of hers – poor unfortunate fellow, *povero disgraziato!* – had been obliged to murder his uncle and his aunt. Probably the pleasure the little boy felt in hearing of this "misfortune" was the earliest expression of that rebellious and fantastic dislike of conventionality which was to run through the whole series of the man's works.

In the letters from Butler to his family, written at school and at college, there is, however, no trace of the violent antagonism which he afterwards believed that he had always felt. It is true that a boy who writes to his father and mother, and indeed in similar circumstances a man too, is constrained to resign himself to a certain innocent hypocrisy. Very few children are able to send to their parents, and very few parents are able to endure from their children, a perfectly sincere description of their crude sentiments during adolescence. But if Samuel Butler was really tormented at home, as Ernest Pontifex was, it is odd that some note of hostility should not have crept into his juvenile correspondence. However, Mr. Festing Jones, who is as judicious as a Lord of Appeal, seems to entertain no doubt that Canon Butler was a holy horror, so that we must bow to his opinion.

The earliest overt evidence of a falling out between father and son is delayed until, in Mr. Jones's unfaltering narrative, we reach the son's twenty-third year. He does not seem, at first, to have combated his father's obstinate demand that he should take orders in the Church of England. That Canon Butler, a clergyman of clergymen, should have desired to see his Samuel take this step, ought not to seem unreasonable, though it certainly proved unlucky. In the novel, it will be remembered, Ernest Pontifex actually was ordained, but to this length Samuel Butler never proceeded. He went to a parish in the east of London to work with a parson who had been one of his grandfather's pupils at Shrewsbury. There his faith in the efficacy of infant baptism was shaken, and presently falling, brought down about his ears the whole fabric of Simeonite Christianity in which he had so assiduously been trained. He suddenly, and no doubt abruptly, wrote to the Canon and said that he "declined to be ordained." From a carnal as well as a spiritual point of view this must have been a nasty shock for his parents, and Mr. Festing Jones tells us "there was a long and painful correspondence." This he mercifully spares us, but refers us to *The Way of All Flesh*, where Butler made dauntless use of it.

The financial situation was difficult. Canon Butler was fairly well-to-do, but he had other children to provide for, and Samuel, who refused to be a clergyman, went on refusing, as it must have seemed to his father, to be anything at all. Like the poet Cowley, he

neither great at Court nor in the War,  
Nor at the Exchange would be, nor at the wrangling Bar.

All professions were suggested, and each in vain. At last it was decided that Samuel should emigrate to New Zealand, and become a sheep farmer. Only nine years earlier, a Church of England colony had been founded at Canterbury, in the South Island, and the town of Christchurch had been founded. It had enjoyed a great success, and by the year 1859, when Butler landed, almost all the sheep lands had been already taken up. At last he found an unoccupied run at the "back of beyond," and built a little homestead for himself, which he called Mesopotamia. It is needless to dwell on this episode of Butler's life, further than to point out that it proved him capable of sustained physical industry and of considerable financial adroitness. The remainder of his career hardly suggests the possession of either. The New Zealand episode is sufficiently dealt with in Butler's own book, *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement*, which, by the way, shows no trace of the author's subsequent merit as a writer. In June, 1864, he sailed homeward from the port of Lyttelton, but not alone, and we now approach the strangest incident of his life.

It was to be expected that the £4,400 which Butler had received from his father in 1859 would by this time have dwindled to zero. Not at all; it had swelled to £8,000. But just before he left New Zealand a young man, called Charles Pauli, whom he had known but very slightly as a journalist in Christchurch, and who had no claim upon Butler of any sort or species, came to him and asked him to pay for his passage back to England, and to advance him £200 a year for three years. "To me," wrote Butler in 1897, "in those days this seemed perfectly easy; and Pauli, I have not the smallest doubt, intended and fully believed – for his temperament was always sanguine – that he should be able to repay me." Butler had very little insight into the "temperament" of Pauli, and the whole of the extraordinary story increases our conviction that this sardonic and sarcastic analyst of imaginary life was as powerless as a child in face of reality. The dreadful Pauli adventure, told for the first time by Mr. Festing Jones, in his deliberate, unimpassioned way, is the most amazing revelation of simplicity traded upon by fraud that it is possible to imagine.

There soon proved to be a complete absence of harmony in the tastes of Butler and Pauli, who had really nothing in common. Yet they settled together, when they arrived in London, in rooms in Clifford's Inn, Fleet Street. There Butler lived for all the rest of his life, thirty-eight years; but presently Pauli went elsewhere. Then the relations of the two became incomprehensible. Pauli was very irritable, and constantly found fault with Butler. He refused to let Butler know his address, and yet was continually sponging upon him. He said that he could get no help from his own parents, and that Butler stood between him and starvation. For three years Pauli did not attempt to work. At last, in 1867, he was called to the Bar. He lunched with Butler three times a week, when he always said that he was earning nothing. Butler's own statement, written in 1898, the year after Pauli's death, is as follows:

I have no means of ascertaining how much Pauli had from me between the years 1864 and 1881 (but it exceeded £3,500). I kept no accounts; I took no receipts from him; the understanding was that he would repay me when he came into his reversion... In 1879 I only admitted to my father having helped Pauli from time to time; the fact was, I had done everything... I had more than shared every penny I had with him, but I believed myself to be doing it out of income, and to have a right to do it.

Throughout the long periods in which Butler was hard pressed for sufficient money to exist – times in which there were painful and unseemly squabbles about an allowance between his father and himself – he was supporting Pauli, whose means of subsistence he took no pains to investigate, and who, in full cognition of Butler's attenuated sources of income, punctually took half for himself. Mr. Festing Jones's statement is amazing:

Pauli was called to the Bar in 1867, and took chambers in Lincoln's Inn for his work. He told Butler where they were, so that he could write if he had any communication to make to him that would not wait till they met; but Butler was not to go there. Of course, he could have gone, but he did not. He could have found out in a hundred ways where Pauli lived if he had set about it; but, knowing that Pauli did not wish it, he did nothing.

At last, in 1897, after having shared his poverty with this strange friend for thirty-three years, Butler read in *The Times* that Pauli was dead. Then, at last, he made inquiries, and found that for a great many years past Pauli's income from the law had exceeded £700 a year, and for nearly twenty had been over £1,000. Pauli left £9,000, not a penny of it to Butler, whose parasite he had been for the greater part of his life, when every five-pound note was of consequence to Butler. One knows not which to be more astounded at – heartless greediness on the one side, or fatuous simplicity on the other. When all the evidence came out at last beyond all further concealment, Butler wrote: "I understand now why Pauli preserved such an iron silence when I implored him to deal with me somewhat after the fashion in which I had dealt with him." [That is to say, in telling him precisely what Butler's exact financial position was.] "The iniquity of the whole thing, as it first struck me in full force, upset me."

This "squalid and miserable story" is told with inexorable fullness by Mr. Festing Jones. What is very remarkable about it is the evidence it gives of Butler's irregular penetration into character. He could be extremely acute in one direction and absolutely obtuse in another. The incredible indulgence which permitted him to be the dupe and victim of a scoundrel like Pauli for more than thirty years seems incompatible with the intense and suspicious analysis which he expended on the motives of his father. After all, when the worst of Canon Butler is admitted, he was a Christian and a gentleman by the side of the appalling Pauli. Yet Butler would sacrifice his father, and actually tell falsehoods, for the purpose of screening and enriching Pauli (see Vol. I., p. 114), of whose villainy he could at any moment have assured himself, and with whom he practically admits that he had nothing in common.

The Pauli episode is valuable in supplying light on certain defects in Butler's intellectual composition. In measure, it tends to explain the inconsistencies, the irregularities of his mental life, and of his action as a scholar. He was the opposite of those who see life steadily, and see it whole. He had no wide horizons, but he investigated a corner or a section of a subject with a burning glass which left all other parts of the surface in darkness. There were Paulis on his mental horizon; there were in almost everything he approached passages where his want of appreciation, his want (let us boldly say) of elementary insight, produced the oddest effect of imperfection. His literary judgments were *saugrenu* to the last extreme. What are we to think of a man who lays it down that "Blake was no good because he learnt Italian to study Dante, and Dante was no good because he was so fond of Virgil, and Virgil was no good because Tennyson ran him; and as for Tennyson, well, Tennyson goes without saying"? There is no critical meaning in such outbursts; they would be almost imbecile in their aimless petulance if we did not understand that Virgil and Dante and Blake lay in the dark segment of Butler's vision, and that he had not so much formed an adverse opinion of their merits as no opinion at all. If, as surprisingly he did on every occasion, he heaped contempt on Virgil, it was simply because he wanted to get Virgil well out of the way of Homer, on whom his enthusiasm was concentrated.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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