

Samuel Butler's Note-Books

Walter De La Mare

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'All philosophies, if you ride them home, are nonsense,' said Butler, and he intended no disparagement of nonsense. His *Note-Books* prove that he rode home every philosophy that came in his way for sheer delight in the exercise, and that he never failed to be refreshed when he reached his journey's end. The one thing he hated was stagnation. Though 'in a way death may be said to be better than life, it is in a very small way': as for dying – that process has absolutely nothing to commend it. Wherefore try all things, be anything, do anything, so long as you escape a life that is nothing better than a 'long lingering death-bed.' He tilted against everything taken for granted – whether in morals, or science, or art, or in conduct. Reputations enraged him because they are usually mausoleums – and very few of his august contemporaries escaped his hail of 'bricks.' 'Agreeable' ideas were his aversion because they are usually moribund, and only a vigorous shaking and a few back-somersaults can reanimate them. He kept his eyes wide open, but dearly enjoyed a peep out of the corner. He loved the wrong side of a fact or a theory – where the quality and workmanship are most evident. His mind was sanctuary to forlorn causes. He not only adopted them but fathered them, and in his company they ceased to be forlorn. His was an inveterately questioning mind – the mind that is not so much seeking for answers as for fresh questions. Butler pursued truth, though 'its pursuit is chimerical.' And though there is no permanent, absolutely unchangeable truth, there are countless vivifying and astonishing points of view. Truth, he thought, should be 'played pretty low down,' 'Pit-truth is more true to the stalls than stall-truth to the pit,' while a little bit of absolute truth might 'dissipate the universe.' So Butler sat in the pit (occasionally in the gallery) and enjoyed both his company and the privilege of expressing his real opinion about the great play, the rest of the audience, and the actors – tragic or farcical – who were doing their best.

He himself never wanted, or at least never attempted, to 'bring down the house.' His *Note-Books* were not actually intended for publication, though he hoped that a few friends might perhaps turn them over at leisure; possibly that the few might prove many and not exclude the worthiest of his foes. They gradually became a well-stocked aquarium of thoughts and whims and fantasies

which now and then supplied the readers of his books with an appetizing if peculiar dish. Ideas little and great, grave and jocose, were confided to them. He wrote first to please himself, and then perhaps to shock a ghostly Mrs. Grundy, or Professor Dryasdust, or Rev. Mr. Wilkinson, peering over his shoulder. His egotism is more obvious than real, though it is real enough. 'He is a poor creature who does not believe himself better than the whole world else.' But a sense of humour suffices 'to keep a man from all sins except those worth committing'; and Butler's humour plays everywhere – nowhere more lightly and luminously than over his deepest gravity.

Thoughts after all are as much secretions of feeling as of mind. And though Butler's thoughts for the most part resemble cold steel, he often uses his victim 'an if he loved him.' A sudden warmth and kindliness at times kindles his words, and imagination, born as it were of his passion for 'common simple straightforwardness,' here and there lifts his prose into a region not far removed from that of poetry. That a poet indeed he was – and one disdaining verse – is proved by the last few pages of this volume.

But the *Note-Books* defy summary or analysis, crammed as they are with speculation and wisdom, irony, satire, pranks, quips, and stories. Any page will set the wits to work, amuse, arrest, provoke. Now and then their *obiter dicta* will test even a strong stomach. The shut mind had better approach them warily – they might blow its hinges off. To Mr. Festing Jones their manageableness and much of their charm and value are due. His index is not less invaluable than the arrangement of his superabundant material – this mute quizzical setting side by side of apparently contradictory extravagancies, each illuminating each. Some of the notes, indeed, had Butler's editor for origin: 'Jones said he had not much conscience, and what little he had was guilty.' If only a like small but very guilty conscience might inspire every editor! As Bacon said: 'You may take *Sarza* to open the Liver; *Steele* to open the Spleene; *Flowers of Sulphur* for the Lungs; *Castoreum* for the Braine; but no Receipt openeth the Heart, but a true Friend; To whom you may impart Griefes, Joyes, Feares, Hopes, Suspensions, Counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the Heart, to oppresse it, in a kind of Civill Shrift or Confession.' *Sarza*, steel, sulphur, castoreum, all are here; here, too, the priceless friend that has done so much to ensure Butler's 'only true' immortality, and that of a duration far exceeding his own hope – 'a good average three score years and ten.'