

BUTLER

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Butler by William Lucas Collins

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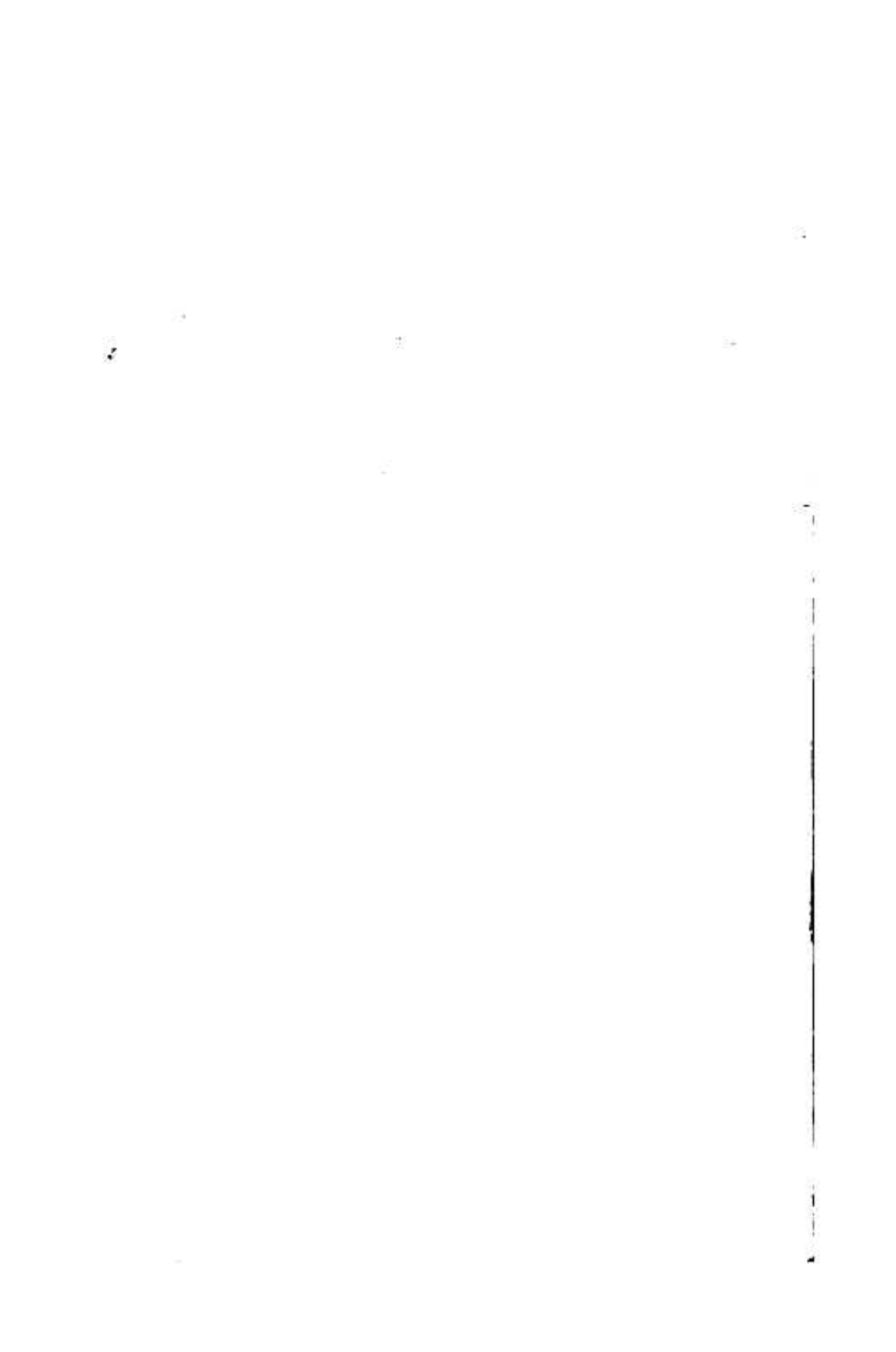
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B U T L E R.

CHAPTER I.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

JOSEPH BUTLER was born at Wantage in 1692. His father was a prosperous linen and woollen draper, who had retired from business to a house known as the Priory, still standing on the outskirts of the town. Though it has undergone many modern alterations, having been occupied for several years as a school, and now as the residence of the curates of the parish, the room is still shown in which the great writer was born. He received his early education under the Rev. Philip Barton, a clergyman of the Church of England, master of the 'Latin' School, held at that time in an Elizabethan building which had replaced the small Norman church, standing in Leland's days side by side with the present church,—a curious instance, as the old antiquary remarks, of 'two churches in one churchyard.' The whole has since been pulled down, and the old Nor-

man porch, which had still survived, has been transferred to the new school buildings in another part of the town. To the training of his first teacher the future bishop must have attached some value, as one of his first acts, as soon as such preferment lay in his power, was to appoint Mr Barton to a comfortable rectory. But Mr Butler, the father, was a Presbyterian, and his wish was to bring up Joseph, his youngest son, to the Presbyterian ministry. With this view he removed him to a Dissenting academy of considerable repute, kept by Mr Samuel Jones, first at Gloucester, and afterwards at Tewkesbury. At this latter place young Butler was associated with some schoolfellows whose distinction in after-life would seem to show that their teacher was a man of more than ordinary ability. Thomas Secker, afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury; Isaac Maddox, Bishop of Worcester; Samuel Chandler, an able Nonconformist divine; Dr Nathaniel Lardner; and John (Lord) Bowes, who became Lord Chancellor of Ireland,—were all at some time or other his fellow-pupils. There must have been something in the training which Butler received under his Nonconformist tutor that rose above the narrowness of sectarianism; and it would be highly interesting, if it were possible, to know what was the course of reading and what the system of instruction which led to such remarkable results in the case of some of his pupils. All we do know is that in November 1713 young Butler—who, although in his twenty-second year, was still a student at Tewkesbury—wrote the first of those remarkable letters to Dr Samuel Clarke of Norwich, the scholar of Newton, and the ablest metaphysician of the time,

which are now printed in most editions of his works. He had been much struck with Clarke's recent publication, 'A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God.' Such demonstrative proof the young student had, as he tells Dr Clarke, been long seeking in vain. 'I have made it my business,' he says in this letter, 'ever since I thought myself capable of such sort of reasoning, to prove to myself the being and attributes of God:' surely a very remarkable declaration—and its honesty cannot be doubted—to come from so young a man. But 'though he had got very probable arguments, yet he could go but a very little way with demonstration in the proof of those things;' and he was not altogether satisfied with Clarke's method of reasoning. He put forward with great acuteness, and at the same time with great modesty, two distinct objections which had struck him in reading the book, first to Clarke's proof of 'the infinity or omnipresence' of the self-existing Being, and secondly to his proof that such Being 'must of necessity be one.' Although these objections have been held by Sir J. Mackintosh and other metaphysical writers to be unanswerable, Butler himself withdrew the first of them in his fourth letter, and (as will be seen) in a subsequent correspondence with Clarke professed himself fully satisfied as to the second.¹ So that they were not withdrawn, as some of his biographers have imagined, out of his modesty as a young man, but simply because he considered them untenable; and whatever may be their real value as against Clarke, we may dismiss them altogether in considering Butler's own views, as not approved by his maturer judgment.

¹ See also *Analogy*, Pt. I. ch. vi.

The young student was very modest in the conduct of this early correspondence. He not only withheld his name—writing under the signature of ‘A Gentleman in Gloucestershire’—but deputed his friend Secker to carry the letters to and from the Tewkesbury post-office, where, no doubt, in those days of unfrequent correspondence, the few letters despatched and received by the members of Mr Jones’s academy were likely to undergo some amount of curious scrutiny.

He very early formed the intention of conforming to the Church. Such intention was naturally far from agreeable to his father’s views; and a kind of conference of Presbyterian divines was gathered in order to deal with young Joseph. But their arguments had little effect, and Mr Butler the elder very sensibly gave way, and allowed his son to enter at Oriel College, Oxford, in March 1714. There he made an acquaintance which had much influence on his future career. He became the intimate friend of Edward Talbot, whose father was then bishop of Salisbury, and afterwards of Durham. Talbot, who became subsequently fellow of the college, was a young man of high promise and somewhat enthusiastic temperament; he was at one time a member of the little ‘Society for Promoting Primitive Christianity,’ set on foot by the well-known William Whiston, whose fanatical vagaries ended at last in confirmed insanity. But the Oxford of those days was on the whole a great disappointment to the earnest young student. He appears to have kept up a correspondence with Dr Clarke, who had become rector of St James’s, Westminster, and a few of the letters, now written under his proper name, have been preserved. One of these is

a reply to some communication from Clarke, of which he says¹—

‘It revived in my mind some very melancholy thoughts I had upon my being obliged to quit those studies which have a direct tendency to divinity, that being what I should choose for the business of my life : it being, I think, of all other studies the most suited to a reasonable nature. I say my being obliged ; for there is very little encouragement² (whether one regards interest or usefulness) nowadays for any one to enter that profession who has not got a way of commanding his assent to received opinions without examination.’

In a subsequent letter (Sept. 30, 1717) he announces his intention of migrating to Cambridge in order to take his degree in law, a step to which he had now received his father’s consent, and asks Clarke to recommend him a tutor there : at the same time strongly expressing his disgust at the formal routine of the Oxford schools.³

‘We are obliged to misspend so much time here in attending frivolous lectures and unintelligible disputations, that I am quite tired out with such a disagreeable way of trifling ; so that if I can’t be excused from these things at Cambridge, I shall only just keep one term there.’

He ‘will beg leave to trouble Dr Clarke with a difficulty in relation to Freedom, which very much perplexes

¹ A copy of this letter is in the library of the British Museum : it is printed in Steere’s *Unpublished Remains of Bishop Butler*, p. 12. It bears no date, but was written soon after he left Gloucester.

² The printed copy has ‘every encouragement ;’ but in the MS., probably in the handwriting of Dr Birch, the word is ‘very,’ and the context leaves no doubt that the word ‘little’ has been omitted.

³ *European Magazine*, Jan. 1802, p. 9.