

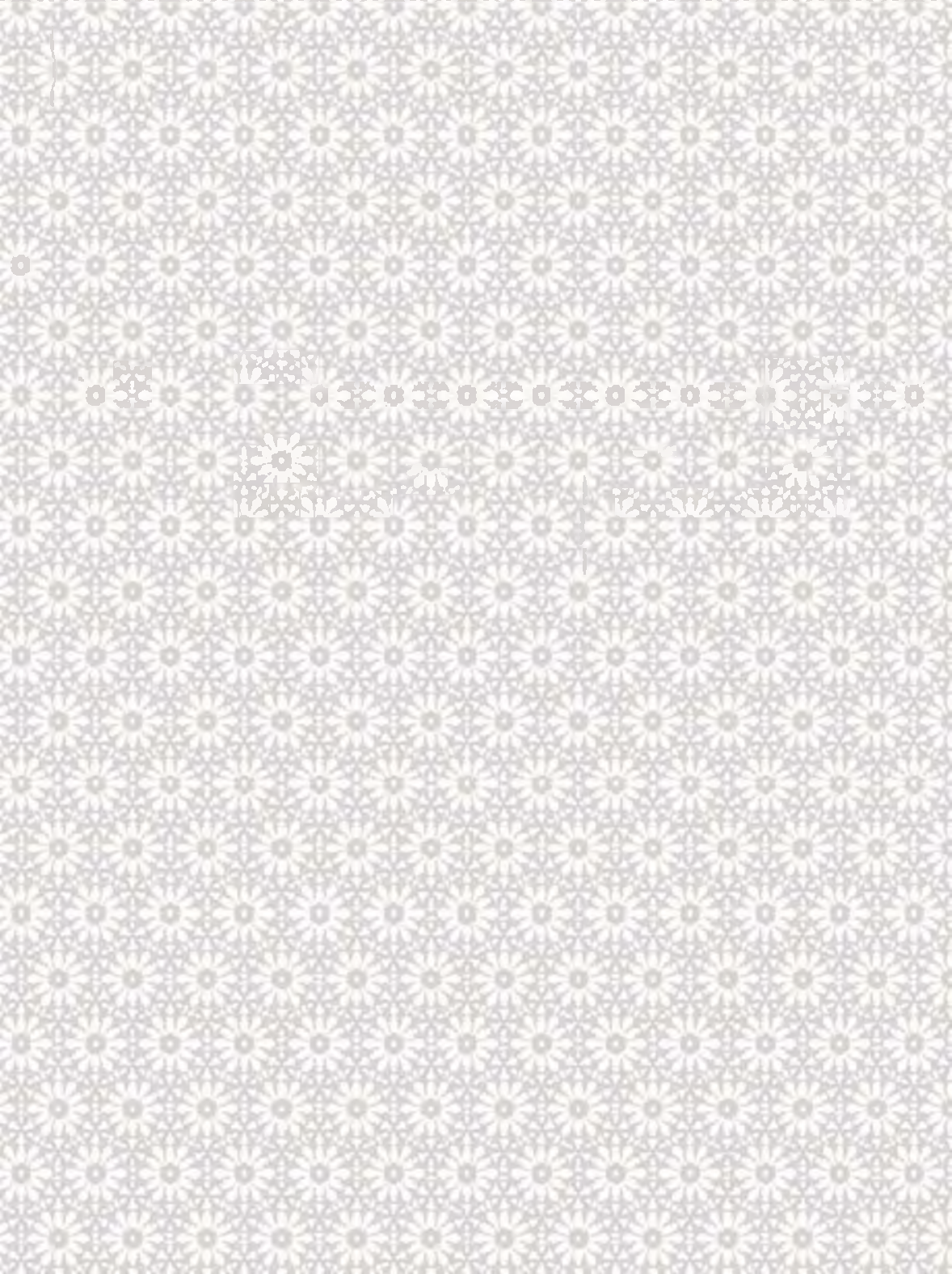
Satire and Humour

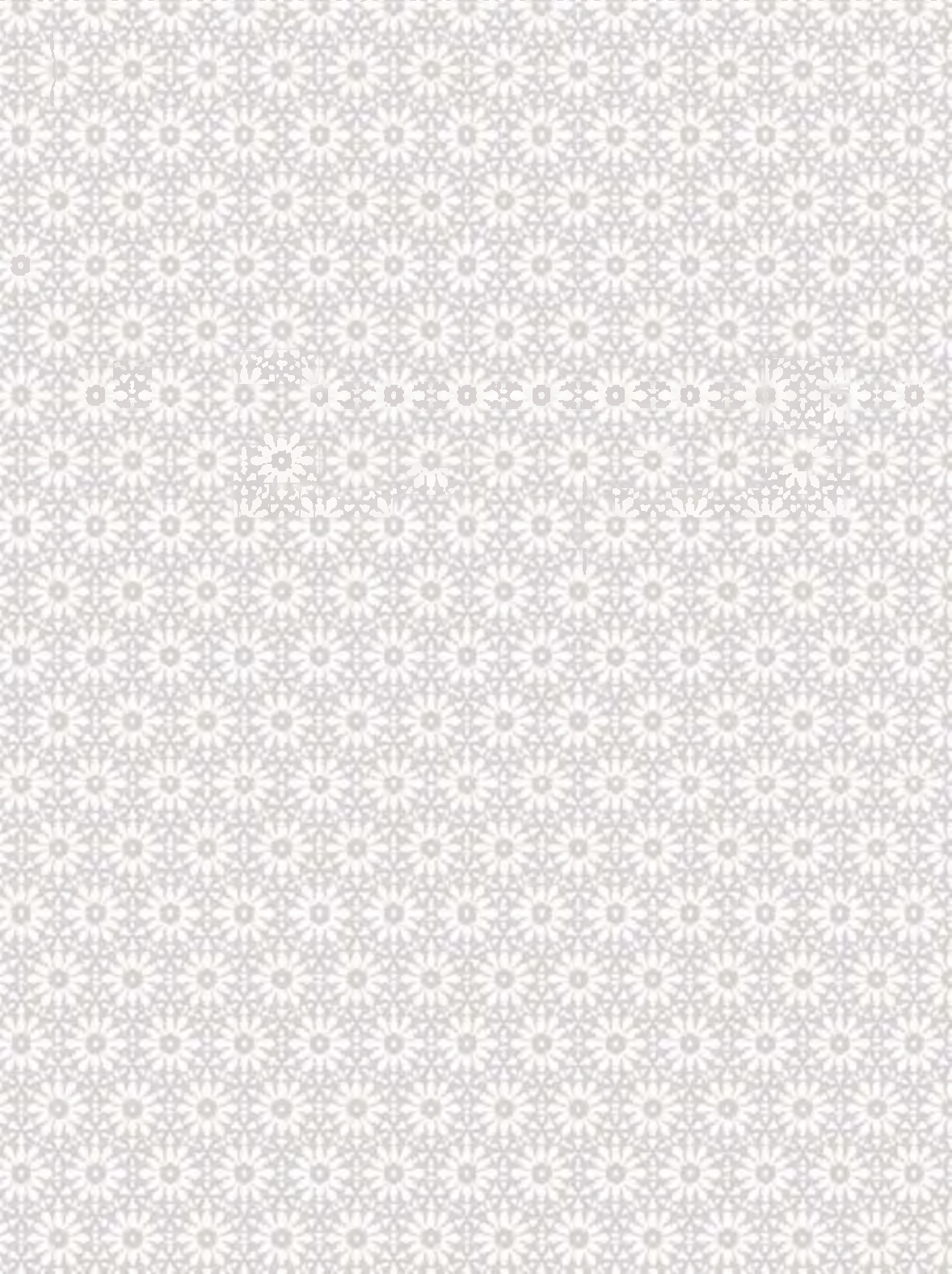
Maurice Hutton

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Maurice Hutton

SATIRE AND HUMOUR



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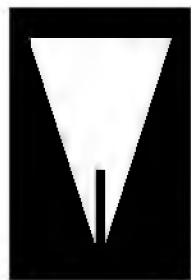
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Título original de la obra digitalizada: *Many minds*

México: ADELyC, 2012.

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SATIRE AND HUMOUR

Edición preparada por
Silvia Alicia Manzanilla Sosa y Karla Marrufo

MANY MINDS

By *MAURICE HUTTON*

Author of "The Greek Point of View"

TORONTO

THE MUSSON BOOK COMPANY

LIMITED

SATIRE AND HUMOUR

HAVING had occasion recently to make a paper for a Centenary of Lowell, I have been led to consider the point of view of Lowell as humorist and satirist, but also the wider question of the point of view of humorists and satirists generally; whence this separate paper.

The peculiarity of the humour and satire of Lowell lay in this, I think: that, though he represented literature and the universities to his countrymen, he yet set himself to reach the governing masses, the masses who did not belong to the universities or literature, and to be understood of the people; or again to put the same thing in a way more interesting and piquant, though he was satirist and humorist, of first-rate excellence, yet, unlike the majority of humorists and satirists, he chose the side of reform and championed the faiths of Reformers and Idealists, the "New Faiths"; or I might as well put it more broadly and say he championed just "Faith," for Faith after all is broadly the quality of reformers; he championed "Faith" and "Reform" against all those forces of conservatism which have generally included, for reasons not very obscure, the humorists' irony and the satirists' wit.

Plato, who has often photographed by casual anticipation the smaller and quainter ironies of our world's life, has an *obiter dictum* on this theme; himself a humorist, and no one can tell how often a humorist, he has the right to be heard.

Advocating emancipation for women, publicity and

public service for them, "Glaucou," he made Socrates say, "Glaucou, my superlative friend, let us ask the wits and humorists to forego for once their usual line: not to make fun of all this novel and reforming feminism for its incongruities: not to jest unceasingly about the ladies who wear uniforms and ride a-horse back"—as who should say who drive motor cars and ride bicycles.

"Of course it is funny to see them, passing funny; but so were our naked races funny even to us once, to see; and they are a scandal still to the barbarian." (And so they still are after twenty centuries in spite of Plato.) "Let us ask the wits and humorists not to scoff but to believe and to be converted to the newer, truer Faith, that nothing can be ridiculous which is useful."

There it lies, you perceive, the doctrine; ancient, simple, true, I apprehend; that wits, satirists and humorists are usually men of little faith; that they are obsessed by usage and conformity to usage; that having eyes only for the incongruous and grotesque, they find the grotesque and incongruous more often than not, in the crude Faith of the Reformer; in the zeal without discretion of the Idealist; it is only natural; the humorist does not take himself seriously; it is the first condition indeed of humour; he cannot then take other men seriously; and how at any rate can he take seriously those most serious moods of humanity which are called Faith and Idealism? If he took conscience, etc., very seriously, the first result would surely be—as we have all seen with our humorist friends when they "get religion"—an immediate falling off of wit and humour; one would decrease as the other increased; it happened conspicuously to that great and delightful humorist, Lewis Carroll, when he grew older and more sober and more serious; he exchanged the lifegiving priceless nonsense of Alice for the painful moralizing of Sylvia and Bruno. So again if Dickens had been more of a moralist and less of a humorist, he could

not have delighted in painting the brutality of Squeers and Mrs. Gamp and the humbug of Pecksniff and the folly of Micawber; he would have been instead depressed by the contrast between human nature, as it was in these grotesque creatures and what it might be and is in the saints; but if the wit and humour in a man do not decrease with age as they decreased with Lewis Carroll, why then they increase and at the expense of Faith; and with them comes an ever keener disgust for all Faith's foibles, an ever keener gusto in launching shafts against demagogism, hysteria, seiolism and the other grotesque garbs in which too often Faith is fain to masquerade; and after that it is but a step to a warfare against all enthusiasm; that dubious quality, that debatable land, enthusiasm; a reproach to our eighteenth century ancestors, the condition of all virtue to the nineteenth century. The wit and humorist, the satirist and cynic seem at last to be but one man with four names, and to have little more definite to say to us than—after Talleyrand, I think—"Surtout point de zèle."

This is the temperament broadly of the humorists from Aristophanes down to Hookham Frere his translator, down to Gibbon and Canning (with his "needy knife-grinder"), down to the Saturday reviewers; I think there was a touch of it on this side of the Atlantic in Hawthorne; he writes somewhere: "The time was come for me now to return to the merchants of Boston, and to the other old fogies, who in this general flux and intangibility of affairs still kept a death-like grip on a few plain truths, which had not been in vogue since yesterday morning."

But it was not the temperament of Plato or Lowell; Lowell seems an exception among English-speaking humorists, with Praed perhaps originally as a companion—but a companion of very imperfect sympathy—for if Praed began life as a reformer he soon passed over, as was to be expected of a wit, to the Conservatives.

I am trying to find other companions for Plato

and Lowell, but it is not easy ; one indeed there is, the prince or princess of wits, humorists and satirists, Jane Austen ; but then is she really parallel with Lowell ? She had no opportunity in her cloistered Hampshire life of meeting radicals and idealists ; she expended her satire, therefore, on the people she saw and met, and they were all conservatives and conventionalists.

Perhaps a more promising parallel is Dickens ; but then Dickens was a satirist, not of types and temperaments, not of reformers and idealists, or of conservatives and realists, but a satirist of individual eccentricity ; he painted gigantic and side-splitting posters, extravagant caricatures of the monthly nurse, of his own sanguine happy-go-lucky father, of the professional humbug with the good bedside manner, of the rascally private schoolmaster ; but these broad farces are not photographs of temperament ; and only two, out of the four illustrations I have chosen, can, even by a stretch, be described as satires at the expense of conservatism, at the expense of existing institutions and established doctrines.

The author of the *Biglow Papers* was wit, satirist and humorist, yet he expended his wit on the Conservatives and Realists, not on the idealists of his day ; and few seem to belong to his class ; and Dickens to belong only partially.

I take a living author for comparison ; even Mr. H. G. Wells, that prophet as he seems to America, that most popular in America of all satirists and humorists, even Mr. Wells—who certainly does not count himself a conservative—cannot compete with Lowell in this regard. There is humour and satire in Peter and Joan both at the expense of idealists and reformers ; and also in other passages—at the expense of Tories and Conventionalists ; but if intrinsically the figures of Miss Phoebe Stubland and Lady Charlotte Sydenham be equally fair targets for his shafts, yet the satire and humour directed at Miss

Phœbe the reformer is infinitely more entertaining, more piquant, better worth reading and writing, if only because the target is so much newer and brighter coloured, so much less fly-blown and dented by previous archers.

It occurred to me that this perhaps was a mere personal judgment, born of my own twist towards the wicked Lady Charlotte and the conservatives, so I asked a young and clever graduate of the University of Toronto; he told me that he on the contrary read with greater zest the satire at the expense of Lady Charlotte, "because he hated and abhorred her; while Miss Phœbe, tho' silly, was a good soul."

I agree with him about the two ladies, of course; but not otherwise. Lady Charlotte is just a fool, and a heartless fool, and does not at this time of day repay study, but Miss Phœbe is an ass; and there are so many asses of her kind about and they bray so loudly and are so strong and willing, so patient and hard-working, that the world must take them seriously or they will take it; I don't think on mature reflection that I need be ashamed of enjoying the satire at Miss Phœbe more than the satire at Lady Charlotte; satire is not needed, is gratuitous, at the expense of moral deformity such as Lady Charlotte's, but satire and humour are discharging their regular task, their appointed work, their life-long rôle and métier, when they fall upon the incongruities of poor dear silly Miss Phœbe.

It reminds me of the old anecdote about Lord Lytton: he took in to dinner an emancipated lady, some Miss Phœbe; "Lord Lytton," said Miss Phœbe, "how can you be a Tory? all fools are Tories." "True, Madam," said Lord Lytton, "but—all asses are Radicals." Let Miss Phœbe then be written down an ass; and, oh, that she be written down an ass pretty quickly, or no one knows what price the world will not have to pay for the knowledge that Miss Phœbe is an ass, and that the mare's-nests and crazes

and delusions of Faith and Reform are as perversive and pervasive, as the instincts themselves to Faith and Reform are essential to good life.

Then what is the *métier* and rôle of humour and satire? and how does it cover both Plato, Lowell, Miss Austen, Dickens and Wells, and also Aristophanes, Gibbon, Canning, Frere, the Saturday reviewers, and again the same Wells ("old Wells re-opened")?

I take it the distinction between the two schools of humour and satire is pretty fine at first sight and slender; humour is mockery at the incongruous; and the incongruous takes two forms broadly which may be so defined—though in reality they are very different—as to seem alike; there is the incongruity between our theories and our practice, our ideals and our actions; and there is also the incongruity between our ideals and theories on the one hand and the actualities, possibilities and facts of life on the other; has not the difference almost disappeared in this definition, the difference between Plato and Aristophanes great though it be? Plato and Lowell satirize the incongruity of our actions in the light of our principles; Aristophanes the incongruity of our principles in the light of the facts and laws of life; it almost looks as if each humorist had the same thing, incongruity, in view; only that they started from opposite points of view and chose the opposite of the two targets for their respective shafts; one was mocking our faithless lives, our disloyalty to principle; and the other our high-falutin principles, our disregard of facts and life and common sense.

But there is nevertheless here a real difference; Lowell is—like my academic friend who hates Lady Charlotte—satirizing moral deformities, faithlessness to conscience; Aristophanes—like a true Greek, a true intellectual—is interested rather in the intellect than in morals, even when he is scoffing at us; and he is satirizing our unbalanced ambitions, our soaring ideals that are like balloons cut adrift from earth

altogether, that take their occupant up to altitudes, the air of which no man can breathe; as that balloonist is a failure, so these idealists are failures. Their hearts are all right like Miss Phœbe's, but their heads are as silly as hers. Imperfect, impossible ideals are her foible; low life, coarse action is the offence—the sin rather—of the Lady Charlotte; Lowell is satirizing sin but Aristophanes philosophy.

Perhaps I am labouring the point unnecessarily. Why not quote what certain of our own humorists have said? The bulk of the humour of Mr. Stephen Leacock, if I recollect aright, is at the expense of foolish idealists, of Mr. William Jennings Bryan and Miss J. Addams, not at the expense of Germany, or, if at the expense of Germany, still at the expense of idealist Germany, the Germany of method and system, with six little birds on each tree-branch singing in harmony or unison, not the Germany of brutal violence and cynical hypocrisy. Impossible ideals, not betrayed and denied ideals move Mr. Leacock's intellectual mirth.

It is more profitable because more difficult to find other contemporary humorists of the opposite school, the school of Plato and Lowell. A critic in New York, after my paper on Lowell, observed that the same reasons which made Lowell interesting, endeared Bernard Shaw to him; Shaw satirizes not the pacifists and cranks, not the Sidney Webbs and Massinghams and Gardiners, not the nation with a capital "N," but the great public, the conventionalists, the nation with a small "n." I suppose that is true though it is at first sight rather paradoxical (and all the more Shavian) that it should be so; at first sight one would expect an intellectual—and Mr. Shaw is nothing if not intellectual, much more intellectual, his friends say, and he himself has said, than Shakespeare—one would expect an intellectual to be rather indifferent to the moral inconsistencies and hypocrisies of the great leviathan, to the vulgar commonplace eternal insincerities of raw

human nature, and to be interested only in the false theories of other intellectuals ; but after all there are two schools of intellectuals, as there are two of satirists and humorists ; there are the “ intellectuals ” of the old world, men like Aristotle, who take a seriously scientific view of the world, and build on the past, on fact and history, and are thereby deeply prejudiced against reform and ideals ; for were the reforms practicable they would have been secured already in that illimitable past which has already tried all permutations and combinations of circumstances and institutions, which seemed to promise improvement, and has adopted already all which really brought improvement ; unrealized ideals are now presumably—Aristotle suggests—Wills-o'-the-wisp, misleading fires. The great flaws of life—slavery, infanticide, abortion, prostitution—though they be to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Christians a horror—I am not exactly quoting Aristotle you perceive but only Aristotelians—remain as permanent flaws—just as Ireland remains a running sore but not a mortal disease in the British body politic—simply because they have always been.

These are the conservative intellectuals ; they accept permanent flaws as a part of the laws of life. But Mr. Shaw has always been a liberal intellectual ; he has always been idealist rather than scientific ; he has, for example, a violent feud with the doctors and the vivisectionists ; though he be an intellectual he is even in a greater degree a humanitarian ; *Androcles and the Lion* is not a scoff at the early Christian idealist ; but rather a sympathetic picture of him as compared with the unchristian ruffians of the world of all ages. *Blanco Posnet* and *The Devil's Disciple* are not caricatures of impracticable visionaries but pictures of rough and foul-mouthed honesty, of unconscious Christianity in fact, which because it is rough and foul-mouthed is quite misunderstood by the smug conventional so-called

Christianity of the Sunday school; the only objection to these entertaining and spirited dramas is obviously that they are a little too obvious and unintellectual; if a reader knows already from his reading of the Gospels that the Sunday schools are not infallible exponents of Christianity, that the publican and the harlot have already been entered in the race for the Kingdom by a Higher Authority than the Sunday school, against the righteous who need no repentance, well, such a reader says "agreed" before the race starts and the intellectual interest of the drama disappears, though the moral interest undoubtedly remains. But there remains also the semi-paradox that an intellectual dramatist is maintaining interest only by his moral appeal. *Androcles* is much better than *Blanco Posnet* for this reason: it retains an intellectual as well as a moral interest; is the ideal of the early Christian really impracticable? "Suppose," Mr. Shaw is here suggesting—"suppose we really try Christianity for the first time in the world as a real working system." *Androcles* remains his best, or one of his best, dramas; there is nothing intellectually cheap about it, as about *Blanco* and *The Devil's Disciple*; but what again the intellectual interest may be in *Widowers' Houses* I cannot discover; nor even much moral interest for that matter; it appears to be a misanthropic picture of human nature, so wholly and unrelievedly bad, especially the feminine variety of it, that no hope remains for man, and interest disappears, except in the sense that Swift, the other Irish misanthrope, may still have an interest for some readers. Ireland is full of misanthropy; its inhabitants apparently enjoy despair; but despair is fatal to all interest, moral and intellectual, in the works it produces, except for Irish readers who love despair and negation and insoluble problems for their own sakes and would feel quite downhearted if a problem were solved.

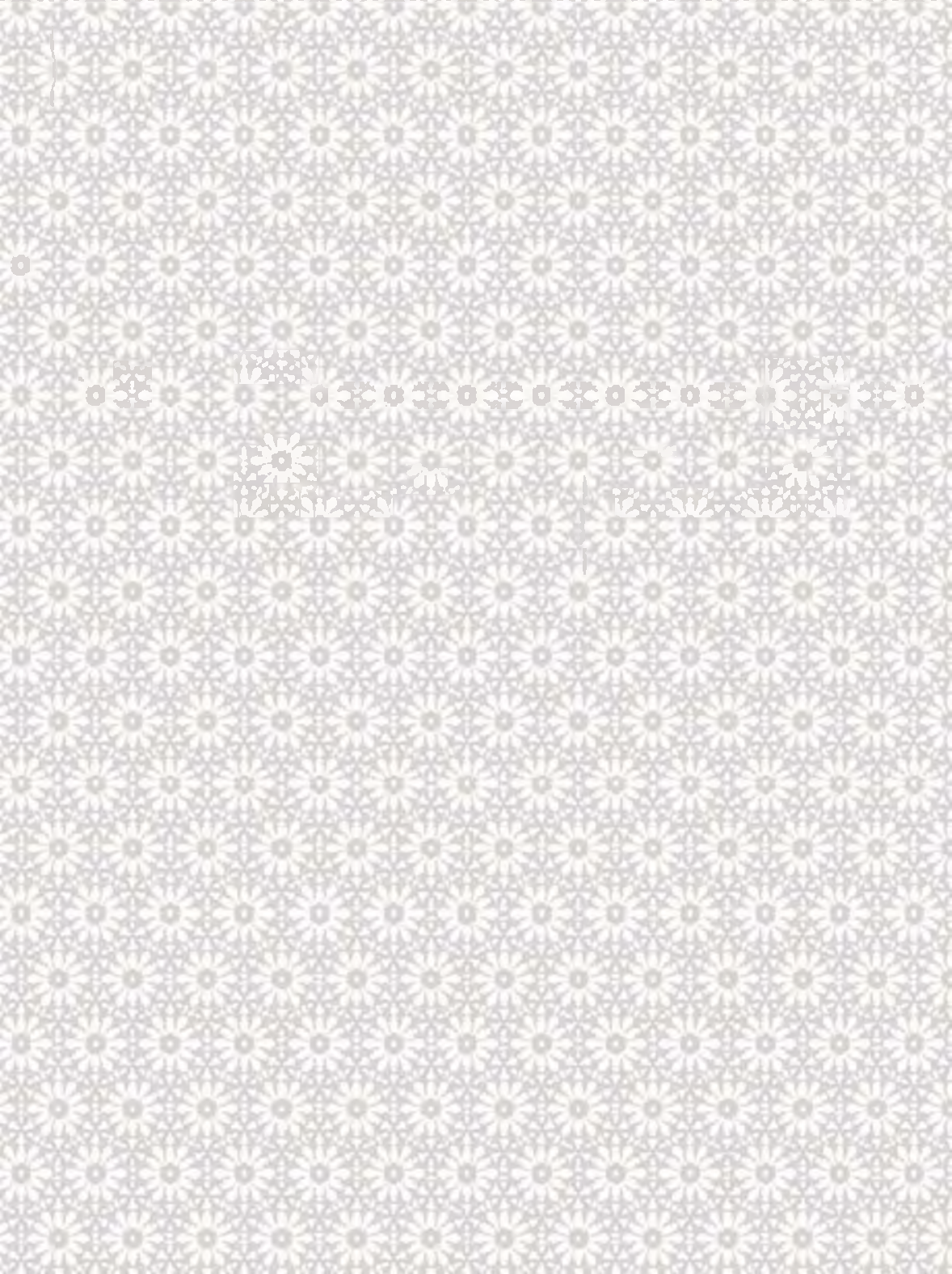
I need not run through the catalogue of Mr. Shaw's

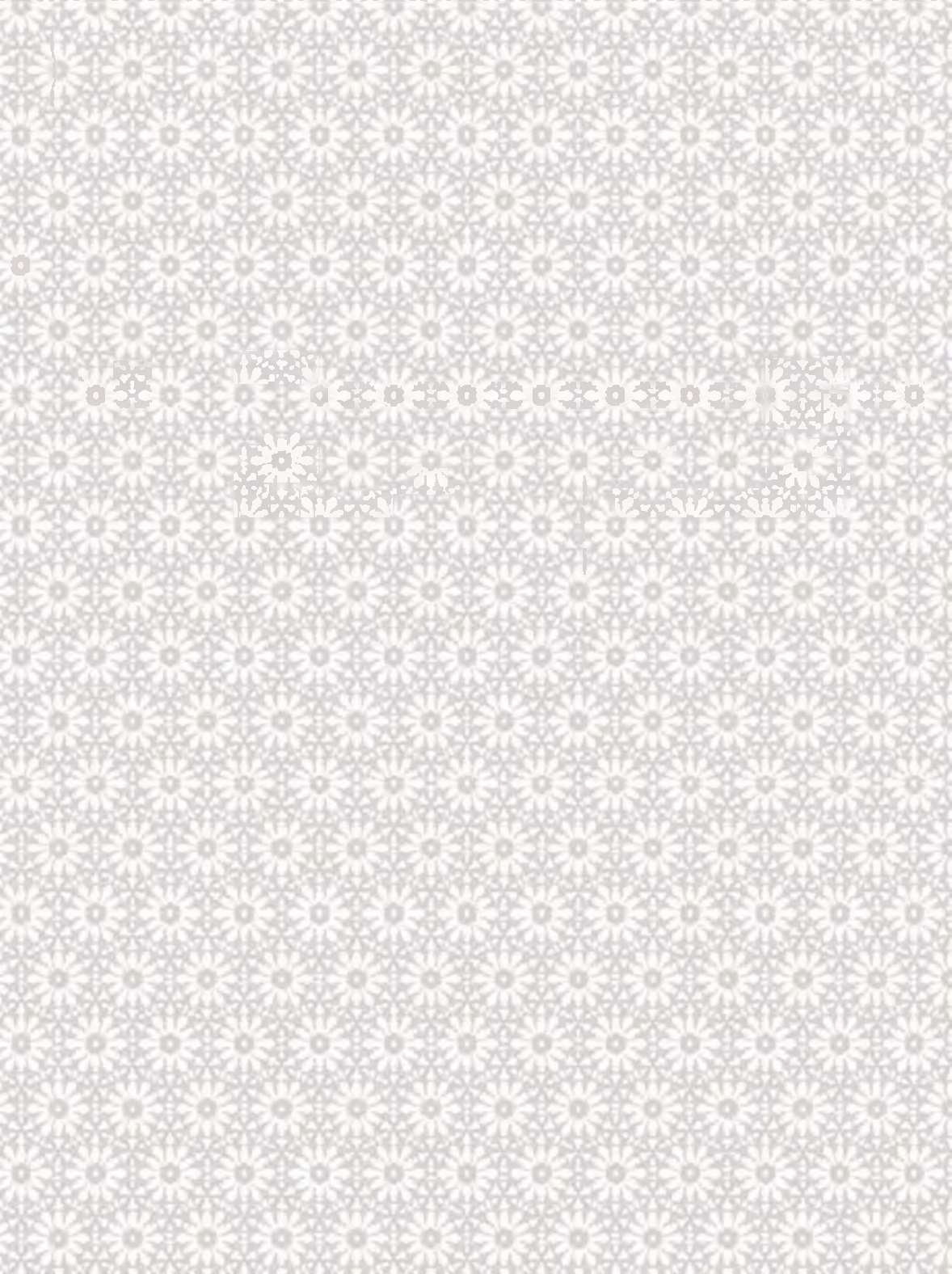
plays ; some, like *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, are quite edifying, but intellectually even cheaper than *Blanco Posnet* ; others are sheer fun and delightful farees, like *Pygmalion* ; the humour whercof is abundant but does not come under either of the heads with which I am concerned.

Something reminds me of a stroke of satire from Mr. Goldwin Smith which does fall under these heads ; under the Plato, Lowell, Shaw head—" 'Give me liberty, or give me death,' said Patrick Henry, and bought another slave." The interest in that sharp lunge at Irish rhetoric is moral obviously, and not intellectual. But Mr. Goldwin Smith's epigrams were not always at the expense of common human insincerity ; there is another epigram hardly relevant here for it is not humorous or satiric, but not less characteristic of its author, at the expense of one of the most popular humanitarian ideals, universal education ; it means, said Mr. Goldwin Smith, "Sensibility without bread." I quote it only to illustrate the point that Mr. Smith coined epigrams on each side against common human nature, and against the idealists ; in the vein of Plato and in the vein of Aristophanes ; as an intellectual who was also idealistic and humanitarian, he could appreciate in turn each school of humour and satire ; but as a moralist and Puritan at heart I think, he probably found greater pleasure or more food for reflection in the moral humorists than in the intellectual, in the school of Plato, Lowell and Shaw and the like, than in Aristophanes, Canning, Frere, Gilbert and the rest. But after all, the two schools are not mutually exclusive ; there are humorists hovering between them, the connecting link ; when Fielding satirizes Square, is it the false pedantic ideal he satirizes or the faithless betrayal of the false ideal ? Or each alike ? The two sides of humour, the two species of incongruity, seem to have met and mixed in the humorous picture of Square.

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Este breve texto sobre la sátira y el humor tiene como punto de partida las reflexiones hechas por Maurice Hutton (1856-1940) al realizar un escrito a propósito del centenario de James Russell Lowell. Considerando algunas de las cualidades más destacadas de Lowell, Hutton se concentra en observar la perspectiva del autor humorista y de sátiras.

Platón, Aristófanes, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, H. G. Wells, G. B. Shaw, son algunos de los nombres sobre los que Hutton pone atención para poder distinguir entre dos líneas fundamentales seguidas por la sátira y el humor, aunque unidas por tener ambas como eje la incongruencia.

Cada una de esas dos escuelas se va a diferenciar por perfilarse hacia el intelecto o hacia la moral. Si una se burla de nuestras acciones, en tanto que atienden a nuestros principios (Platón, Lowell), la otra hará mofa de nuestros principios y cómo no hay modo de que se correspondan con nuestras acciones (Aristófanes). Sin embargo, apunta Hutton a modo de conclusión, estos dos enfoques pueden llegar a encontrar un pleno equilibrio como en algunas obras de G. B. Shaw.