

MODERN MEN AND MUMMERS

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Modern men and mummies by Hesketh Pearson

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HESKETH PEARSON

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AND MUMMERS**

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BY
HESKETH PEARSON



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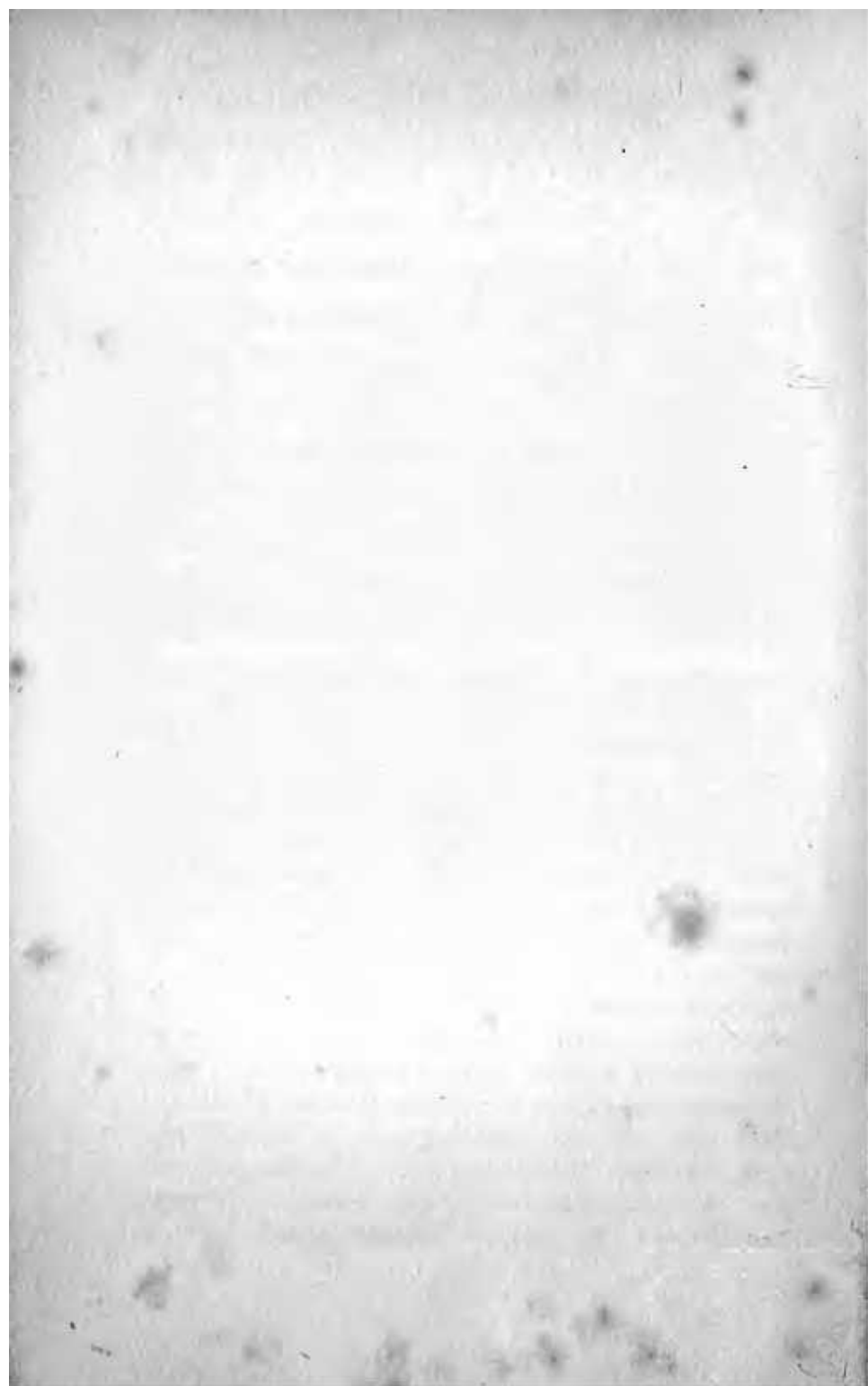
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MODERN MEN AND MUMMERS



I

BERNARD SHAW

WE moderns are the products of Bernard Shaw. In that whole riot of imaginary nonsense which G. K. Chesterton gave to the world under the heading of "George Bernard Shaw," there stands out one very fine and very true thing—the summary of Shaw's ennobling influence on the spirit of his age. The rest of the book is worthless as a criticism of Shaw though interesting as a revelation of Chesterton.

The thing that alienated most people from Shaw was precisely the thing that first drew me to him; I mean the pamphlet entitled "Commonsense about the War" which he issued in November, 1914. It is the greatest piece of journalism, the finest tract for the times, he has ever written. It should be republished in a small pocket edition and presented to every budding politician as a model of how statesmen ought to use their heads when other people lose theirs. It is the classic text-book of mental balance and sobriety. Incidentally, too, it was the pluckiest thing Shaw ever did; and, although unrecognized as such at the time, it typified the spirit of the average Englishman who won the war as distinct from the average Englishman who talked twaddle about how it

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ought to be won. The sane instinct behind that pamphlet was the sane instinct of the men who fought in the trenches and on the deserts. Of course it gained the author a pretty thorough share of obloquy at the time, but (as I found in the East) jackals invariably howl when they scent a thoroughbred.

Thus it was not till 1914 that I began to read Shaw's books seriously. Among modern authors, he was the only first-class pre-war writer in England who is not a post-war back-number. And, dreadful to relate, his influence has developed so enormously that there is every possibility of his shortly being accepted as a classic, even by the professional critics.

As everyone knows, Shaw's longer plays and prefaces are penetrating studies of prevailing sociological conditions—all except three. The immense superiority of his "Three Plays for Puritans" over all his other works is so remarkable that I am amazed to find their peculiar significance passed over by every critic who has worried himself about Shaw. And yet to me it is the one outstanding and immortal thing about the man. Of course he doesn't think so himself, but then he is his own worst critic. He prefers the formless dialectic of "Getting Married" and "Misalliance" to the deeper, simpler things of an earlier period.

Now there are three or four subjects fundamental to all great art, at the root of all philosophy, and perennially interesting throughout the ages. The best work of all the greatest artists and prophets has concerned itself with one or other of these things. Indeed that best work has often helped to keep