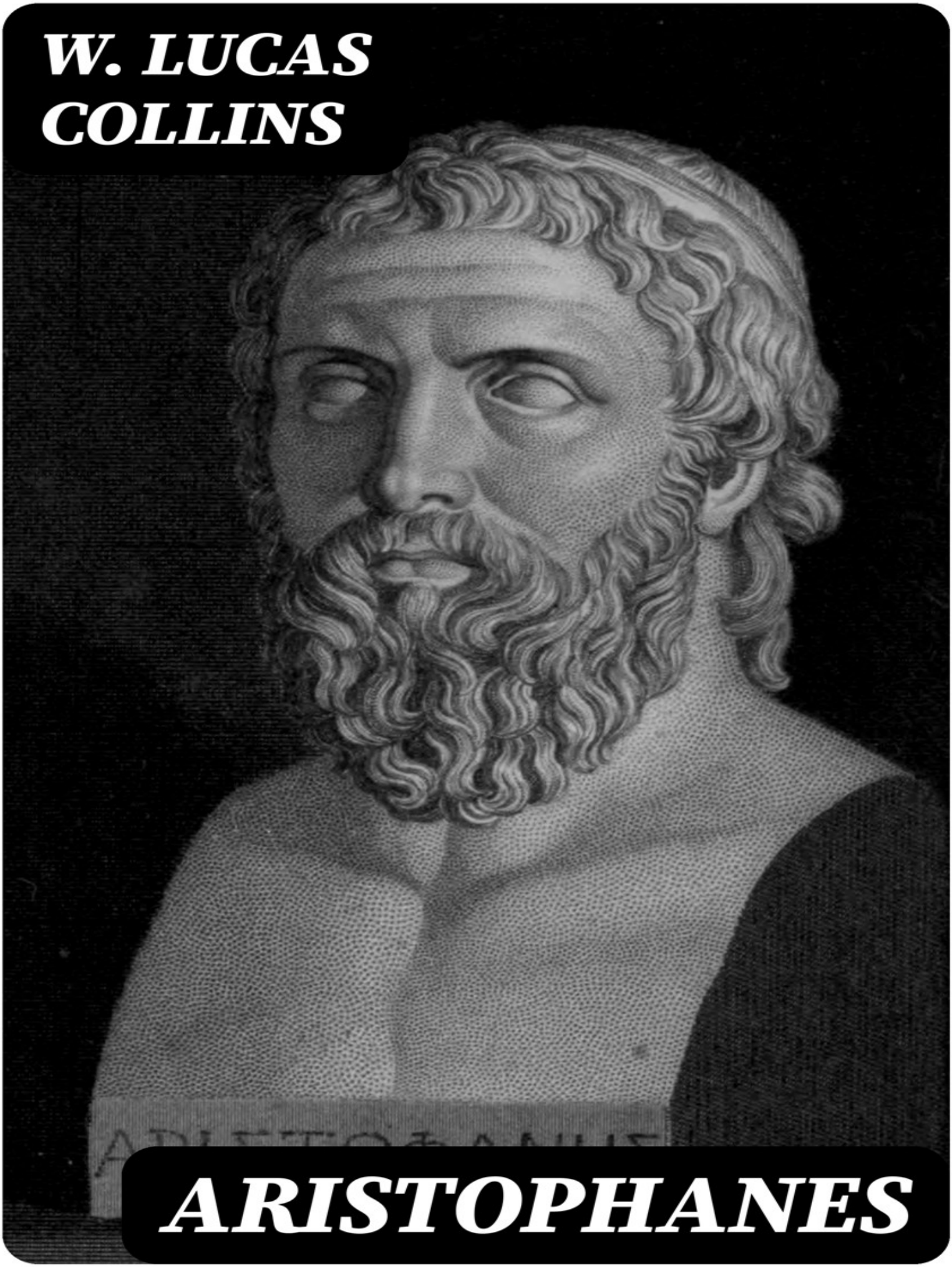
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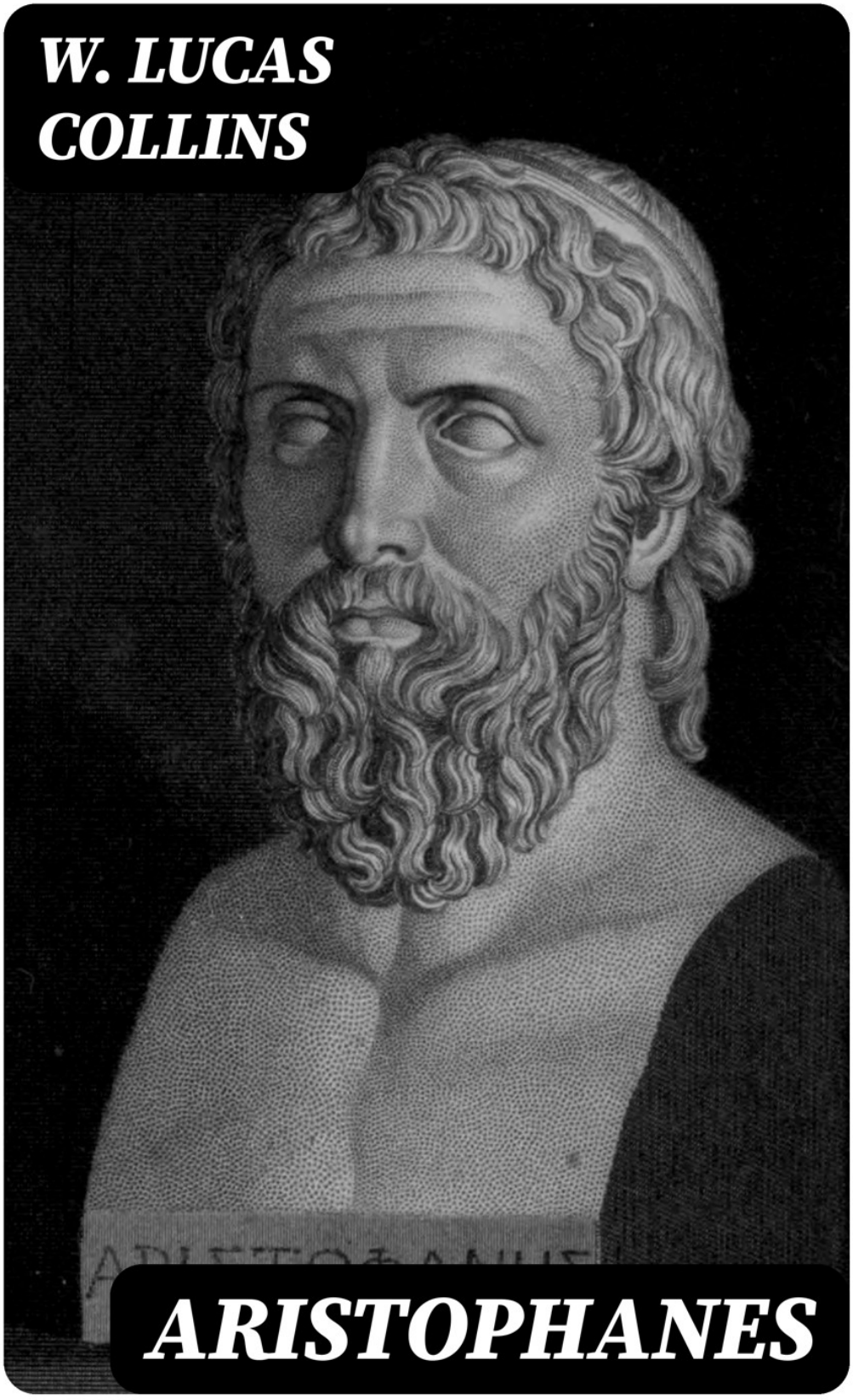
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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

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It has been observed already,[1] in speaking of these “ancient” classical authors, that some of them, in their tone and spirit, have much more in common with modern literature than with their great predecessors who wrote in the same language, and whose volumes stand ranged upon the same shelves. This may be remarked with especial truth of these Comedies of Aristophanes. A national comedy which has any pretension at all to literary merit—which is anything more than mere coarse buffoonery—must, in its very nature, be of later growth than epic or lyric poetry, tragedy, or historic narrative. It assumes a fuller intellectual life, a higher civilisation, and a keener taste in the people who demand it and appreciate it. And Athenian comedy, as we have it represented in the plays of Aristophanes, implies all these in a very high degree on the part of the audience to whom it was presented. It flourished in those glorious days of Athens which not long preceded her political decline,—when the faculties of her citizens were strung to full pitch, when there was much wealth and much leisure, when the arts were highly cultivated and education widely spread, and the refinements and the vices which follow such a state of things presented an ample field for the play of wit and fancy, the *badinage* of the humorist, or the more trenchant weapons of satire.

But although this Athenian comedy is, in one sense, so very modern in its spirit, we must not place it in comparison with that which we call comedy now. It was something quite different from that form of drama which, with its elaborate and artistic plot, its lively incidents, and brilliant dialogue, has taken possession under the same name of the modern stage. It is difficult to compare it to any one form of modern literature, dramatic or other. It perhaps most resembled what we now call burlesque; but it had also very much in it of broad farce and comic opera, and something also (in the hits at the fashions and follies of the day with which it abounded) of the modern pantomime. But it was something more, and more important to the Athenian public, than any or all of these could have been. Almost always more or less political, and sometimes intensely personal, and always with some purpose more or less important underlying its wildest vagaries and coarsest buffooneries, it supplied the place of the political journal, the literary review, the popular caricature, and the party pamphlet, of our own times. It combined the attractions and the influence of all these; for its grotesque masks and elaborate “spectacle” addressed the eye as strongly as the author’s keenest witticisms did the ear of his audience. Some weak resemblance of it might have been found, in modern times, in that curious outdoor drama, the Policinella of the Neapolitans: something of the same wild buffoonery overlying the same caustic satire on the prominent events and persons of the day, and even something of the same popular influence.[2] The comic dramatist who produced his annual budget of lampoon and parody has also been compared, not inaptly, to the “Terræ

Filius" of our universities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; that curious shadow of the old pagan saturnalia, when once in the year some clever and reckless graduate claimed prescriptive right to launch the shafts of his wit against proctors, doctors, heads of houses, and dignities in general—too often without much more regard to decency than his Athenian prototype. The Paris 'Charivari' and the London 'Punch,' in their best days, had perhaps more of the tone of Aristophanes about them than any other modern literary production; for Rabelais, who resembled the Athenian dramatist in many of his worst characteristics as well as his best, can scarcely be called modern, and has few readers. The 'Age' and the 'Satirist' newspapers, to those who remember them during their brief day of existence, may well represent Athenian comedy in its worst and most repulsive features—its scurrilous personalities and disregard of decency.

It may be remembered by the readers of these volumes that the dramatic representations at Athens took place only at the Dionysia, or Great Festivals of Bacchus, which were held three times a-year, and that each play was brought out by its author in competition for the prize of tragedy or comedy which was then awarded to the successful exhibitors by the public voice, and which was the object of intense ambition.[3] This will in some degree account for the character of Attic comedy. It was an appeal to the audience, —not only to their appreciation of wit and humour, but also to their sympathies, social and political, their passions, and their prejudices. Therefore it was so often bitterly personal and so hotly political. The public demand was always for

something “sensational” in these respects, and the authors took care to comply with it. And therefore, also, we find introduced so frequently confidential appeals to the audience themselves, not only in those addresses (called the *parabasis*) in which the author is allowed to speak in his own proper person through the mouth of the Chorus, but also on the part of the individual characters during the action of the play. They enlist the spectators themselves among the *dramatis personæ*,—not a very artistic proceeding, but no doubt popular and very tempting. It has been adopted by modern dramatists, even by so high an authority as Molière,[4] and notoriously by farce-writers of more recent date.

But there could be no greater mistake than to suppose that the audience before whom these plays of Aristophanes were represented were impressible only by these lower influences. It has just been said that education at Athens was widely spread. Readers, indeed, might not be many, when books were necessarily so few; but the education which was received by the masses through their constant attendance at the theatre, the public deliberative assembly, and the law-courts, was quite as effective in sharpening their intelligence and their memory. Fully to realise to ourselves what Greek intellect was in the bright days of Athens, and to understand how well that city deserved her claim to be the intellectual “eye of Greece,” we should not appeal to the works of her great poets, her historians, or her orators, which may be assumed (though scarcely in the case of the tragedians) to have depended for their due appreciation upon the finer tastes of the few: we must turn

to these comedies, addressed directly to an audience in which, although those finer tastes were not unrepresented, the verdict of what we should call the “masses” was essential to the author’s success. There is abundant evidence in these pieces—it is impressed upon the reader disagreeably in every one of them—that, willingly or unwillingly, the writer pandered to the vulgar taste, and degraded his Muse to the level of the streets in order to catch this popular favour; though not without occasional protests in his own defence against such perversion of his art—protests which we must fear were only half sincere. But there is evidence quite as conclusive that the intellectual calibre, and even the literary taste, of this audience was of a far higher character than that of the modern pit and gallery. The dramatist not only assumes on their behalf a familiarity with all the best scenes and points in the dramas of the great tragedians—which, in the case of such inveterate play-goers as the Athenians were, is not so very surprising—and an acquaintance with the political questions and the public celebrities of the day which possibly might be found, in this age when every man is becoming a politician, amongst a Paris or a London theatrical auditory; but he also expects to find, and evidently did find, an acquaintance with, and an appreciation of, poetry generally, a comprehension of at least the salient points of different systems of philosophy, and an ability to seize at once and appropriate all the finer points of allusion, of parody, and of satire. Aristophanes is quite aware of the weaknesses and the wilfulness of this many-headed multitude, whom he satirises so unsparingly to their faces; but he had good right to say of them, as he

does in his ‘Knights,’ that they were an audience with whom he might make sure at least of being understood,—“For our friends here are sharp enough.”[5]

It is to be regretted that the Comedies of Aristophanes are now less read at our universities than they were some years ago. If one great object of the study of the classics is to gain an accurate acquaintance with one of the most brilliant and interesting epochs in the history of the world, no pages will supply a more important contribution to this knowledge than those of the great Athenian humorist. He lays the flesh and blood, the features and the colouring, upon the skeleton which the historian gives us. His portraits of political and historical celebrities must of course be accepted with caution, as the works of a professional caricaturist; but, like all good caricatures, they preserve some striking characteristics of the men which find no place in their historical portraits, and they let us know what was said and thought of them by irreverent contemporaries. It is in these comedies that we have the Athenians at home; and although modern writers of Athenian history have laid them largely under contribution in the way of reference and illustration, nothing will fill in the outline of the Athens of Cleon and Alcibiades and Socrates so vividly as the careful study of one of these remarkable dramas in the Greek original. One is inclined to place more faith than is usually due to anecdotes of the kind in that which is told of Plato, that when the elder Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, wrote to him to request information as to the state of things at Athens, the philosopher sent him a copy of Aristophanes’s

‘Clouds,’ as the best and most trustworthy picture of that marvellous republic.

Of the writers of the “Old” Athenian comedy (so termed to distinguished it from the “New,” which was of a different character, and more like our own), Aristophanes is the only one whose works have come down to us. He had some elder contemporaries who were formidable and often successful rivals with him in the popular favour, but of their plays nothing now remains but a few titles and fragments of plots preserved by other writers. Of one of them, Cratinus, who died a few years after Aristophanes began to write for the stage, the younger author makes some not unkindly mention more than once, though he had been beaten by him somewhat unexpectedly upon the old man’s last appearance, after some interval of silence, in the dramatic arena. It is curious to learn that in this his last production the veteran satirist found a subject in himself. The critics and the public had accused him (not unjustly, if we may trust Aristophanes here) of having grown too fond of wine, and of dulling his faculties by this indulgence. His reply was this comedy, which he called ‘The Bottle.’ He himself was the hero of the piece, and was represented as having deserted his lawful wife, the Comic Muse, for the charms of this new mistress. But in the catastrophe he was reformed and reconciled to the worthier lady; and the theatrical critics —perhaps out of sympathy with their old favourite— awarded him the first prize, though Aristophanes had brought forward in the competition of that year what he esteemed one of his masterpieces.[6]

The extreme licence of personal attack which was accorded by general consent to the writers of comedy, so that any man whose character and habits were at all before the public might find himself at any moment held up to popular ridicule upon the stage, will be the subject of remark hereafter. It must have been very unpleasant and embarrassing, one must suppose, to the individuals thus marked out; but the sacredness of private life and character was something unknown to an Athenian, and he would not be nearly so sensitive on these points as ourselves. The very fact that this licence was allowed to exist so long is some proof that it was on the whole not unfairly exercised. The satiric writer must have felt that his popularity depended upon his aiming his blows only where the popular feeling held them to be well deserved; and there are some follies and vices which this kind of castigation can best reach, and cases of public shamelessness or corruption which, under a lax code of morality, can only be fitly punished by public ridicule. When, towards the close of the great struggle between Athens and Sparta, the executive powers of the State had been usurped by the oligarchy of the “Four Hundred,” a law was passed to prohibit, under strong penalties, the introduction of real persons into these satiric dramas: but the check thus put to the right of popular criticism upon public men and measures was only a token of the decline of Athenian liberty. The free speech of comedy was in that commonwealth what the freedom of the press is in our own; and, in both cases, the risk of its occasional abuse was not so dangerous as its suppression.

Something must be said of the personal history of our author himself, though such biographical account of him as we have is more or less apocryphal. He was no doubt a free citizen of Athens, because when the great popular demagogue Cleon, whom he had so bitterly satirised on the stage, took his revenge by an attempt to prove the contrary in a court of law, he failed in his purpose. Aristophanes was also probably a man of some wealth, since he had property, as he tells us in one of his plays, in the island of Ægina. In politics and in social questions he was a stanch Conservative; proud of the old days of Athenian greatness, jealous of the new habits and fashions which he thought tended to enervate the youth of the state, and the new systems of philosophy which were sapping the foundations of morality and honesty. His conservatism tended perhaps to the extreme, or at least takes that appearance in the exaggeration natural to the comic satirist; for he certainly appears occasionally as the champion of a pre-scientific age, when gymnastics held a higher place in education than philosophy, and when the stout Athenian who manned the galleys at Salamis thought he knew enough if he "knew how to ask for barley-cake, and shout his yo-heave-oh!"[7] He was as much of an aristocrat as a man might be, to be an Athenian: he hated the mob-orators of his time, not only for their principles but for their vulgar origin, with an intensity which he did not care to disguise, and which, had not his wit and his boldness made him a popular favourite, rather in spite of his opinions than because of them, would have brought him into even more trouble than it actually did. He began to write for the stage at a very early age—so early,

that he was not allowed by law to produce his two first pieces (now unfortunately lost) in his own name. Some of the old commentators would have us believe that he wrote his first comedy when he was only eighteen, but this, from internal evidence, seems improbable; he must have been five or six years older. He supplied the dramatic festivals with comedies, more or less successful, for at least thirty-seven years (from B.C. 427 to 390); but of the forty plays which he is known to have produced we have only eleven, and some of them in a more or less imperfect form. For the preservation of these, according to ancient tradition, we are indebted to one who might have seemed a very unlikely patron for this kind of pagan literature—no other than St John Chrysostom. That worthy father of the Church is said to have slept with a manuscript of Aristophanes under his pillow; it is at least certain that he had studied his plays and admired them, since he has not unfrequently imitated their language in his own writings.

Some enthusiastic admirers of Aristophanes would have us regard him not only as a brilliant humorist, but as a high moral teacher, concealing a grand design under the mask of a buffoon. They seem to think that he was impelled to write comedy chiefly by a patriotic zeal for the welfare of Athens, and a desire to save his countrymen from corrupting influences. This is surely going too far. His comedies have a political cast, mainly because at Athens every man was a politician; and no doubt the opinions which he advocates are those which he honestly entertained. But he would probably have been content himself with the reputation of being what he was,—a brilliant and successful writer for the

stage; a vigorous satirist, who lashed vice by preference, but had also a jest ready against ungainly virtue; a professional humorist who looked upon most things on their ludicrous side; who desired to be honest and manly in his vocation, and, above all things, not to be dull.

It may be right to say a word here, very briefly, as to the coarseness of the great comedian. It need not be said that it will find no place in these pages. He has been censured and apologised for on this ground, over and over again. Defended, strictly speaking, he cannot be. His personal exculpation must always rest upon the fact, that the wildest licence in which he indulged was not only recognised as permissible, but actually enjoined as part of the ceremonial at these festivals of Bacchus: that it was not only in accordance with public taste, but was consecrated (if terms may be so abused) as a part of the national religion. Such was the curse which always accompanied the nature-worship of Paganism, and infected of necessity its literature. But the coarseness of Aristophanes is not corrupting. There is nothing immoral in his plots, nothing really dangerous in his broadest humour. Compared with some of our old English dramatists, he is morality itself. And when we remember the plots of some French and English plays which now attract fashionable audiences, and the character of some modern French and English novels not unfrequently found upon drawing-room tables, the least that can be said is, that we had better not cast stones at Aristophanes.

CHAPTER II.

THE KNIGHTS.

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The two first comedies which Aristophanes brought out —‘The Revellers’ and ‘The Babylonians’—are both unfortunately lost to us. The third was ‘The Acharnians,’ followed in the next year by ‘The Knights.’ It may be convenient, for some reasons, to begin our acquaintance with the author in this latter play, because it is that into which he seems to have thrown most of his personality as well as the whole force of his satiric powers. There was a reason for this. In its composition he had not only in view his fame as a dramatic writer, or the advocacy of a political principle, but also a direct personal object.

It is now the eighth year of the Peloponnesian War, in which all Greece is ranged on the side of the two great contending powers, Athens and Sparta. The great Pericles—to whose fatal policy, as Aristophanes held, its long continuance has been due—has been six years dead. His place in the commonwealth has been taken by men of inferior mark. And the man who is now most in popular favour, the head of the democratic interest, now completely in the ascendant, is the poet’s great enemy, Cleon: an able but unscrupulous man, of low origin, loud and violent, an able speaker and energetic politician. Historians are at variance as to his real claim to honesty and patriotism, and it remains a question never likely to be set at rest. It would be manifestly unfair to decide it solely on the evidence of

his satirical enemy. He and his policy had been fiercely attacked in the first comedy produced by Aristophanes —‘The Babylonians,’ of which only the merest fragment has come down to us. But we know that in it the poet had satirised the abuses prevalent in the Athenian government, and their insolence to their subject-allies, under the disguise of an imaginary empire, the scene of which he laid in Babylon. Cleon had revenged himself upon his satirist by overwhelming him with abuse in the public assembly, and by making a formal accusation against him of having slandered the state in the presence of foreigners and aliens, and thus brought ridicule and contempt upon the commonwealth of Athens. In the drama now before us, the author is not only satirising the political weakness of his countrymen; he is fulfilling the threat which he had held out the year before in his ‘Acharnians,’—that he would “cut up Cleon the tanner into shoe-leather for the Knights,”—and concentrating the whole force of his wit, in the most unscrupulous and merciless fashion, against his personal enemy. In this bitterness of spirit the play stands in strong contrast with the good-humoured burlesque of ‘The Acharnians’ and ‘The Peace,’ or, indeed, with any other of the author’s productions which have reached us.

This play follows the fashion of the Athenian stage in taking its name from the Chorus, who are in this case composed of THE KNIGHTS—the class of citizens ranking next to the highest at Athens. A more appropriate title, if the title is meant to indicate the subject, would be that which Mr Mitchell gives it in his translation—‘The Demagogues.’ The principal character in the piece is “Demus”—*i.e.*, People: an

impersonation of that many-headed monster the Commons of Athens, the classical prototype of Swift's John Bull; and the satire is directed against the facility with which he allows himself to be gulled and managed by those who are nominally his servants but really his masters—those noisy and corrupt demagogues (and one in particular, just at present) who rule him for their own selfish ends.

The characters represented are only five. "People" is a rich householder—selfish, superstitious, and sensual—who employs a kind of major-domo to look after his business and manage his slaves. He has had several in succession, from time to time. The present man is known in the household as "The Paphlagonian," or sometimes as "The Tanner"—for the poet does not venture to do more than thus indicate Cleon by names which refer either to some asserted barbarian blood in his family, or to the occupation followed by his father. He is an unprincipled, lying rascal; a slave himself, fawning and obsequious to his master, while cheating him abominably—insolent and bullying towards the fellow-slaves who are under his command. Two of these are Nicias and Demosthenes—the first of them holding the chief naval command at this time, with Demosthenes as one of his vice-admirals. These characters bear the real names in most of the manuscripts, though they are never so addressed in the dialogue; but they would be readily known to the audience by the masks in which the actors performed the parts. But in the case of Cleon, no artist was found bold enough to risk his powerful vengeance by caricaturing his features, and no actor dared to represent him on the stage. Aristophanes is said to have played the part himself, with his face, in the