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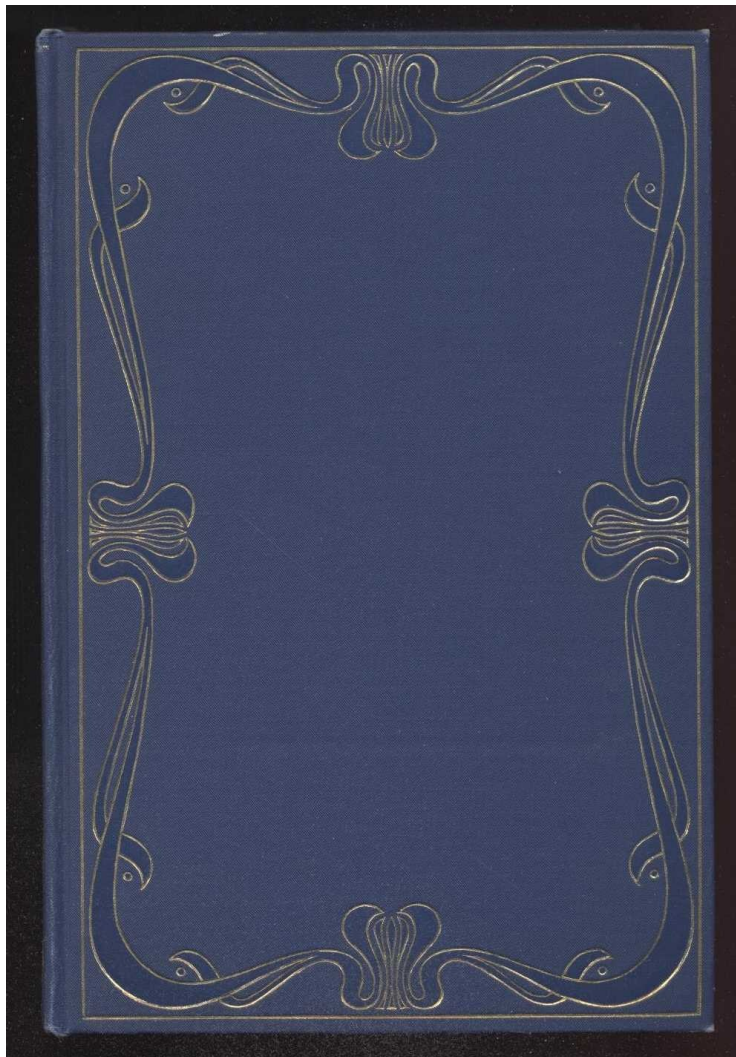
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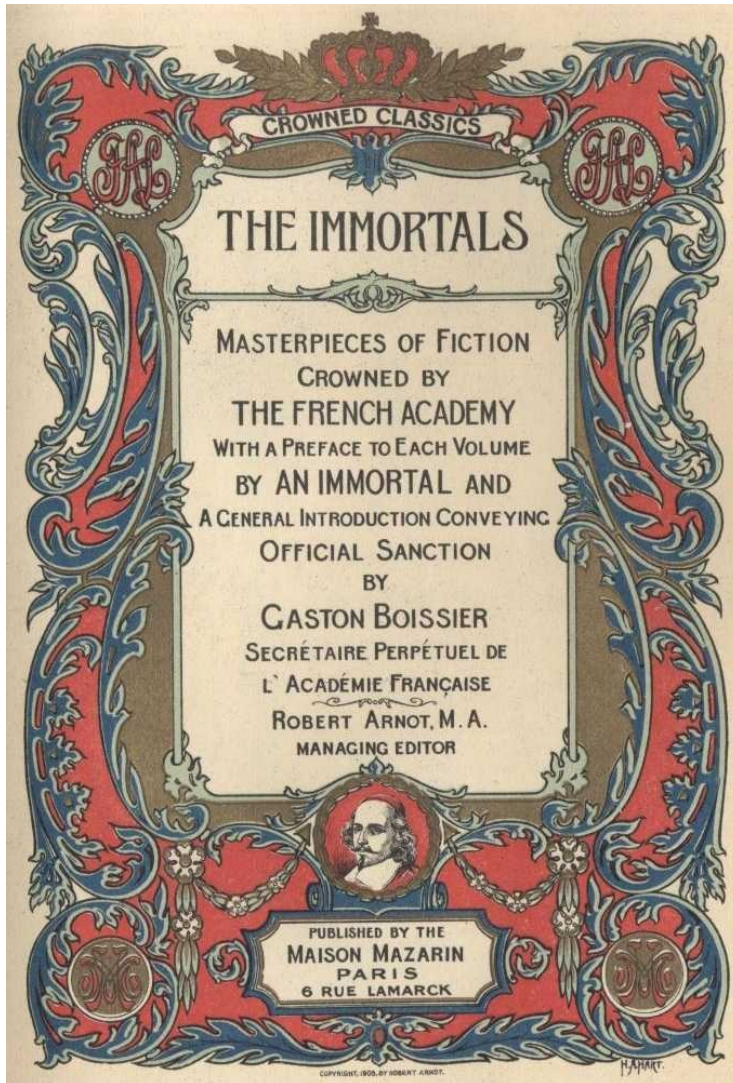
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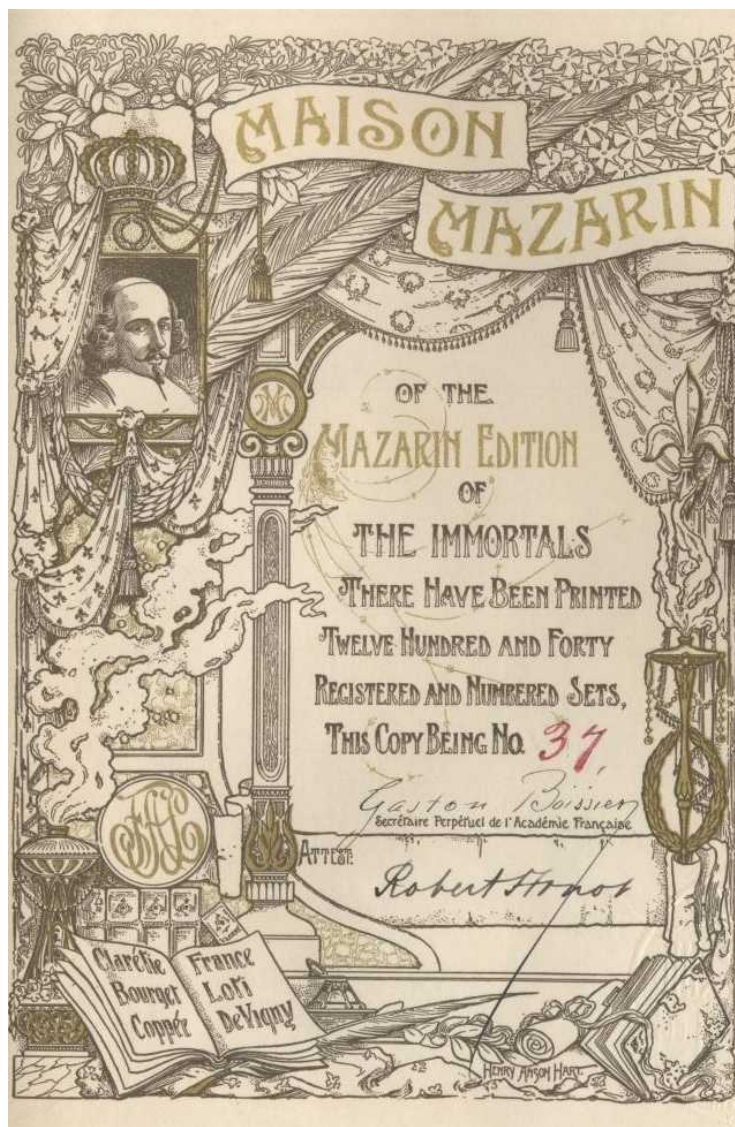
THE IMMORTALS

MASTERPIECES OF FICTION
CROWNED BY
THE FRENCH ACADEMY
WITH A PREFACE TO EACH VOLUME
BY AN IMMORTAL AND
A GENERAL INTRODUCTION CONVEYING
OFFICIAL SANCTION
BY
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ON-LINE INDEX

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With a General Introduction to the Series by GASTON
BOISSIER,
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[GENERAL INTRODUCTION](#)

INDIVIDUAL VOLUMES

Click on the ## to go to the index of the particular file

- [## SERGE PANINE, By Georges Ohnet](#)
 - [## THE RED LILY, By Anatole France](#)
 - [## MONSIEUR, MADAME AND BEBE, By Gustave Droz](#)
 - [## PRINCE ZILAH, By Jules Claretie](#)
 - [## ZIBELINE, By Philippe De Massa](#)
 - [## A WOODLAND QUEEN \('Reine des Bois'\), By Andre Theuriet](#)
 - [## CONFESSION OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY, By Alfred de Musset](#)
 - [## MONSIEUR DE CAMORS, By Octave Feuillet](#)
 - [## CINQ MARS, By Alfred De Vigny](#)
 - [## THE ABBE CONSTANTIN, By Ludovic Halevy](#)
 - [## A ROMANCE OF YOUTH, By Francois Coppee](#)
 - [## COSMOPOLIS, By Paul Bourget](#)
 - [## JACQUELINE, By \(Mme. Blanc\) Therese Bentzon](#)
 - [## THE INK STAIN \(Tache d'Encre\), By Rene Bazin](#)
 - [## FROMONT AND RISLER, By Alphonse Daudet](#)
 - [## GERFAUT, By Charles de Bernard](#)
 - [## CONSCIENCE, By Hector Malot](#)
 - [## MADAME CHRYSANTHEME, By Pierre Loti](#)
 - [## AN "ATTIC" PHILOSOPHER, By Emile Souvestre](#)
-

ALL BOOKS and CHAPTERS

SERGE PANINE

By Georges Ohnet

BOOK 1.

- | | |
|--------------|------------------------------|
| CHAPTER I. | THE HOUSE OF DESVARENNES |
| CHAPTER II. | THE GALLEY-SLAVE OF PLEASURE |
| CHAPTER III. | PIERRE RETURNS |
| CHAPTER IV. | THE RIVALS |
| CHAPTER V. | A CRITICAL INTERVIEW |
| CHAPTER VI. | A SIGNIFICANT MEETING |

BOOK 2.

- | | |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| CHAPTER VII. | JEANNE'S SECRET |
| CHAPTER VIII. | A PLEASANT UNDERSTANDING |
| CHAPTER IX. | THE DOUBLE MARRIAGE |
| CHAPTER X. | CAYROL'S DISAPPOINTMENT |
| CHAPTER XI. | CONFESSION |
| CHAPTER XII. | THE FETE |

BOOK 3.

- | | |
|---------------|-----------------|
| CHAPTER XIII. | THE FIRST BREAK |
|---------------|-----------------|

| | |
|---------------|---------------------|
| CHAPTER XIV. | A SUDDEN JOURNEY |
| CHAPTER XV. | MOTHER AND DAUGHTER |
| CHAPTER XVI. | THE TELLTALE KISS |
| CHAPTER XVII. | CAYROL IS BLIND |

BOOK 4.

| | |
|----------------|------------------------------|
| CHAPTER XVIII. | THE UNIVERSAL CREDIT COMPANY |
| CHAPTER XIX. | SIN GROWS BOLDER |
| CHAPTER XX. | THE CRISIS |
| CHAPTER XXI. | "WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT" |
| CHAPTER XXII. | THE MOTHER'S REVENGE |

THE RED LILY

By Anatole France

BOOK 1.

| | |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| CHAPTER I. | "I NEED LOVE" |
| CHAPTER II. | "ONE CAN SEE THAT YOU ARE YOUNG!" |
| CHAPTER III. | A DISCUSSION ON THE LITTLE CORPORAL |
| CHAPTER IV. | THE END OF A DREAM |
| CHAPTER V. | A DINNER 'EN FAMILLE' |
| CHAPTER VI. | A DISTINGUISHED RELICT |
| CHAPTER VII. | MADAME HAS HER WAY |
| CHAPTER VIII. | THE LADY OF THE BELLS |
| CHAPTER IX. | CHOULETTE FINDS A NEW FRIEND |

BOOK 2.

| | |
|----------------|--|
| CHAPTER X. | DECHARTRE ARRIVES IN FLORENCE |
| CHAPTER XI. | "THE DAWN OF FAITH AND LOVE" |
| CHAPTER XII. | HEARTS AWAKENED |
| CHAPTER XIII. | "YOU MUST TAKE ME WITH MY OWN SOUL!" |
| CHAPTER XIV. | THE AVOWAL |
| CHAPTER XV. | THE MYSTERIOUS LETTER |
| CHAPTER XVI. | "TO-MORROW?" |
| CHAPTER XVII. | MISS BELL ASKS A QUESTION |
| CHAPTER XVIII. | "I KISS YOUR FEET BECAUSE THEY HAVE COME!" |
| CHAPTER XIX. | CHOULETTE TAKES A JOURNEY |
| CHAPTER XX. | WHAT IS FRANKNESS? |
| CHAPTER XXI. | "I NEVER HAVE LOVED ANY ONE BUT YOU!" |
| CHAPTER XXII. | A MEETING AT THE STATION |

BOOK 3.

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| CHAPTER XXIII. | "ONE IS NEVER KIND WHEN ONE IS IN LOVE" |
| CHAPTER XXIV. | CHOULETTE'S AMBITION |
| CHAPTER XXV. | "WE ARE ROBBING LIFE" |
| CHAPTER XXVI. | IN DECHARTRE'S STUDIO |
| CHAPTER XXVII. | THE PRIMROSE PATH |
| CHAPTER XXVIII. | NEWS OF LE MENIL |
| CHAPTER XXIX. | JEALOUSY |
| CHAPTER XXX. | A LETTER FROM ROBERT |
| CHAPTER XXXI. | AN UNWELCOME APPARITION |
| CHAPTER XXXII. | THE RED LILY |
| CHAPTER XXXIII. | A WHITE NIGHT |
| CHAPTER XXXIV. | "I SEE THE OTHER WITH YOU ALWAYS!" |
| CHAPTER XXXIII. | "ONE IS NEVER KIND WHEN ONE IS IN LOVE" |

- CHAPTER XXIV. CHOULETTE'S AMBITION
 CHAPTER XXV. "WE ARE ROBBING LIFE"
 CHAPTER XXVI. IN DECHARTRE'S STUDIO
 CHAPTER XXVII. THE PRIMROSE PATH
 CHAPTER XXVIII. NEWS OF LE MENIL
 CHAPTER XXIX. JEALOUSY
 CHAPTER XXX. A LETTER FROM ROBERT
 CHAPTER XXXI. AN UNWELCOME APPARITION
 CHAPTER XXXII. THE RED LILY
 CHAPTER XXXIII. A WHITE NIGHT
 CHAPTER XXXIV. "I SEE THE OTHER WITH YOU ALWAYS!"
-

MONSIEUR, MADAME AND BEBE

By Gustave Droz

BOOK 1.

- CHAPTER I. MY FIRST SUPPER PARTY
 CHAPTER II. THE SOUL IN AGONY. TO MONSIEUR CLAUDE DE L

 CHAPTER III. MADAME DE K.
 CHAPTER IV. SOUVENIRS OF LENT
 CHAPTER V. MADAME AND HER FRIEND CHAT BY THE
 FIRESIDE
 CHAPTER VI. A DREAM
 CHAPTER VII. AN EMBASSY BALL
 CHAPTER VIII. MY AUNT AS VENUS
 CHAPTER IX. HUSBAND AND WIFE MY DEAR SISTERS:
 CHAPTER X. MADAME'S IMPRESSIONS
 CHAPTER XI. A WEDDING NIGHT
 CHAPTER XII. THE HONEYMOON

BOOK 2.

- CHAPTER XIII. THE BLUE NOTE-BOOK
 CHAPTER XIV. THE BLUE NOTE-BOOK AGAIN
 CHAPTER XV. MY WIFE GOES TO A DANCE
 CHAPTER XVI. A FALSE ALARM
 CHAPTER XVII. I SUP WITH MY WIFE
 CHAPTER XVIII. FROM ONE THING TO ANOTHER
 CHAPTER XIX. A LITTLE CHAT

BOOK 3.

- CHAPTER XX. THE HOT-WATER BOTTLE
 CHAPTER XXI. A LONGING
 CHAPTER XXII. FAMILY LIFE
 CHAPTER XXIII. NEW YEAR'S DAY
 CHAPTER XXIV. LETTERS OF A YOUNG MOTHER TO HER FRIEND
 CHAPTER XXV. FOUR YEARS LATER
 CHAPTER XXVI. OLD RECOLLECTIONS
 CHAPTER XXVII. THE LITTLE BOOTS

| | |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| CHAPTER XXVIII. | BABIES AND PAPAS |
| CHAPTER XXIX. | HIS FIRST BREECHES |
| CHAPTER XXX. | COUNTRY CHILDREN |
| CHAPTER XXXI. | AUTUMN |
| CHAPTER XXXII. | HE WOULD HAVE BEEN FORTY NOW |
| CHAPTER XXXIII. | CONVALESCENCE |
| CHAPTER XXXIV. | FAMILY TIES |

PRINCE ZILAH

By Jules Claretie

BOOK 1.

| | |
|---------------|--|
| CHAPTER I. | THE BETROTHAL FETE |
| CHAPTER II. | THE BARONESS'S MATCHMAKING |
| CHAPTER III. | THE STORY OF THE ZILAHS |
| CHAPTER IV. | "WHEN HUNGARY IS FREE!" |
| CHAPTER V. | "MY FATHER WAS A RUSSIAN!" |
| CHAPTER VI. | A GYPSY PRINCESS |
| CHAPTER VII. | THE STORY OF MARSА |
| CHAPTER VIII. | "HAVE I NO RIGHT TO BE HAPPY" |
| CHAPTER IX. | "O LIBERTY! O LOVE! THESE TWO I NEED!" |
| CHAPTER X. | "IS FATE SO JUST?" |
| CHAPTER XI. | A RIVER FETE |

BOOK 2.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| CHAPTER XII. | A DARK PAGE |
| CHAPTER XIII. | "MY LETTERS OR MYSELF" |
| CHAPTER XIV. | "HAVE I THE RIGHT TO LIE?" |
| CHAPTER XV. | "AS CLINGS THE LEAF UNTO THE TREE" |
| CHAPTER XVI. | "IT IS A MAN THEY ARE DEVOURING!" |
| CHAPTER XVII. | MARSА'S GUARDIANS |
| CHAPTER XVIII. | "THERE IS NO NEED OF ACCUSING ANYONE." |
| CHAPTER XIX. | "A BEAUTIFUL DREAM" |
| CHAPTER XX. | THE BRIDAL DAY |
| CHAPTER XXI. | "THE TZIGANA IS THE MOST LOVED OF ALL!" |
| CHAPTER XXII. | A DREAM SHATTERED |
| CHAPTER XXIII. | "THE WORLD HOLDS BUT ONE FAIR MAIDEN" |

BOOK 3.

| | |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| CHAPTER XXIV. | A LITTLE PARISIAN ROMANCE |
| CHAPTER XXV. | THE HOME OF "PUCK" |
| CHAPTER XXVI. | "AM I AVENGED?" |
| CHAPTER XXVII. | "WHAT MATTERS IT HOW MUCH WE SUFFER?" |
| CHAPTER XXVIII. | THE STRICKEN SOUL |
| CHAPTER XXIX. | "LET THE DEAD PAST BURY ITS DEAD" |
| CHAPTER XXX. | "TO SEEK FORGETFULNESS" |
| CHAPTER XXXI. | "IF MENKO WERE DEAD!" |
| CHAPTER XXXII. | THE VALE OF VIOLETS |

ZIBELINE

By Philippe De Massa

BOOK 1.

| | |
|---------------|------------------------|
| CHAPTER I. | LES FRERES-PROVENCAUX |
| CHAPTER II. | BIRDS OF PREY |
| CHAPTER III. | THE GAME |
| CHAPTER IV. | THE RESULT |
| CHAPTER V. | A DESPERATE RESOLUTION |
| CHAPTER VI. | THE FAREWELL |
| CHAPTER VII. | THE VOW |
| CHAPTER VIII. | IN SEARCH OF GLORY |
| CHAPTER IX. | THE BOIS DE BOULOGNE |
| CHAPTER X. | GENERAL DE PREROLLES |
| CHAPTER XI. | EUGENIE GONTIER |
| CHAPTER XII. | RIVAL BEAUTIES |

BOOK 2.

| | |
|----------------|------------------------------|
| CHAPTER XIII. | THE INDUSTRIAL ORPHAN ASYLUM |
| CHAPTER XIV. | A WOMAN'S INSTINCT |
| CHAPTER XV. | DEFIANCE OF MRS. GRUNDY |
| CHAPTER XVI. | FRATERNAL ADVICE |
| CHAPTER XVII. | THE LADY BOUNTIFUL |
| CHAPTER XVIII. | A MODERN TARTUFE |
| CHAPTER XIX. | BROKEN TIES |

BOOK 3.

| | |
|-----------------|---------------------------|
| CHAPTER XX. | ZIBELINE RECEIVES |
| CHAPTER XXI. | A DASHING AMAZON |
| CHAPTER XXII. | AN UNEXPECTED MEETING |
| CHAPTER XXIII. | THE MILITARY REVIEW |
| CHAPTER XXIV. | THE CHALLENGE |
| CHAPTER XXV. | THE AMAZON HAS A FALL |
| CHAPTER XXVI. | AN UNCONSCIOUS AVOWAL |
| CHAPTER XXVII. | DISTRACTION |
| CHAPTER XXVIII. | THE VOW REDEEMED |
| CHAPTER XXIX. | THE MARQUISE DE PREROLLES |

('Reine des Bois')

By Andre Theuriet

BOOK 1.

CHAPTER I. THE UNFINISHED WILL
CHAPTER II. THE HEIR TO VIVEY
CHAPTER III. CONSCIENCE HIGHER THAN THE LAW

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER IV. THE DAWN OF LOVE
CHAPTER V. LOVE'S INDISCRETION
CHAPTER VI. LOVE BY PROXY

BOOK 3.

CHAPTER VII. THE STRANGE, DARK SECRET
CHAPTER VIII. LOVE'S SAD ENDING
CHAPTER IX. LOVE HEALS THE BROKEN HEART

CONFESSION OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY

(Confession d'un Enfant du Siecle)

By Alfred de Musset

BOOK 1.

PART I.

CHAPTER I. TO THE READER
CHAPTER II. REFLECTIONS
CHAPTER III. THE BEGINNING OF THE CONFESSIONS
CHAPTER IV. THE PATH OF DESPAIR
CHAPTER V. A PHILOSOPHER'S ADVICE
CHAPTER VI. MADAME LEVASSEUR
CHAPTER VII. THE WISDOM OF SIRACH
CHAPTER VIII. THE SEARCH FOR HEALING
CHAPTER IX. BACCHUS, THE CONSOLER

PART II.

CHAPTER I. AT THE CROSSWAYS
CHAPTER II. THE CHOSEN WAY
CHAPTER III. AFRICAN HOSPITALITY
CHAPTER IV. MARCO
CHAPTER V. SATIETY

BOOK 2.

PART III.

- CHAPTER I. DEATH, THE INEVITABLE
CHAPTER II. THE BALM OF SOLITUDE
CHAPTER III. BRIGITTE
CHAPTER IV. RIPENING ACQUAINTANCE
CHAPTER V. AN INTERVIEW
CHAPTER VI. THE RUGGED PATH OF LOVE
CHAPTER VII. THE VENUSBERG AGAIN

PART IV.

- CHAPTER I. THE THORNS OF LOVE
CHAPTER II. UNCERTAINTY
CHAPTER III. EXPLANATIONS
CHAPTER IV. BRIGITTE'S LOSS
CHAPTER V. A TORTURED SOUL

BOOK 3.

PART V.

- CHAPTER I. SWEET ANTICIPATIONS
CHAPTER II. THE DEMON OF DOUBT
CHAPTER III. THE QUESTION OF SMITH
CHAPTER IV. IN THE FURNACE
CHAPTER V. TRUTH AT LAST
CHAPTER VI. SELF-SACRIFICE THE SOLUTION

MONSIEUR DE CAMORS

By Octave Feuillet

BOOK 1.

- CHAPTER I. "THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH"
CHAPTER II. FRUIT FROM THE HOTBED OF PARIS
CHAPTER III. DEBRIS FROM THE REVOLUTION
CHAPTER IV. A NEW ACTRESS IN A NOVEL ROLE
CHAPTER V. THE COUNT LOSES A LADY AND FINDS A MISSION
CHAPTER VI. THE OLD DOMAIN OF REUILLY
CHAPTER VII. ELISE DE TECLE
CHAPTER VIII. A DISH OF POLITICS

BOOK 2.

- CHAPTER IX. LOVE CONQUERS PHILOSOPHY
CHAPTER X. THE PROLOGUE TO THE TRAGEDY
CHAPTER XI. NEW MAN OF THE NEW EMPIRE
CHAPTER XII. CIRCE
CHAPTER XIII. THE FIRST ACT OF THE TRAGEDY
CHAPTER XIV. AN ANONYMOUS LETTER

BOOK 3.

- CHAPTER XV. THE COUNTESS DE CAMORS
CHAPTER XVI. THE REPTILE STRIVES TO CLIMB

| | |
|----------------|-------------------------------|
| CHAPTER XVII. | LIGHTNING FROM A CLEAR SKY |
| CHAPTER XVIII. | ONE GLEAM OF HOPE |
| CHAPTER XIX. | THE REPTILE TURNS TO STING |
| CHAPTER XX. | THE SECOND ACT OF THE TRAGEDY |
| CHAPTER XXI. | THE FEATHER IN THE BALANCE |
| CHAPTER XXII. | THE CURTAIN FALLS |

CINQ MARS

By Alfred De Vigny

BOOK 1.

| | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| CHAPTER I. | THE ADIEU |
| CHAPTER II. | THE STREET |
| CHAPTER III. | THE GOOD PRIEST |
| CHAPTER IV. | THE TRIAL |

BOOK 2.

| | |
|---------------|---------------|
| CHAPTER V. | THE MARTYRDOM |
| CHAPTER VI. | THE DREAM |
| CHAPTER VII. | THE CABINET |
| CHAPTER VIII. | THE INTERVIEW |

BOOK 3.

| | |
|---------------|-----------------|
| CHAPTER IX. | THE SIEGE |
| CHAPTER X. | THE RECOMPENSE |
| CHAPTER XI. | THE BLUNDERS |
| CHAPTER XII. | THE NIGHT-WATCH |
| CHAPTER XIII. | THE SPANIARD |

BOOK 4.

| | |
|---------------|---------------|
| CHAPTER XIV. | THE RIOT |
| CHAPTER XV. | THE ALCOVE |
| CHAPTER XVI. | THE CONFUSION |
| CHAPTER XVII. | TOILETTE |

BOOK 5.

| | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| CHAPTER XVIII. | THE SECRET |
| CHAPTER XIX. | THE HUNTING PARTY |
| CHAPTER XX. | THE READING |
| CHAPTER XXI. | THE CONFSSIONAL |

BOOK 6.

| | |
|----------------|---------------|
| CHAPTER XXII. | THE STORM |
| CHAPTER XXIII. | ABSENCE |
| CHAPTER XXIV. | THE WORK |
| CHAPTER XXV. | THE PRISONERS |
| CHAPTER XXVI. | THE FETE |

THE ABBE CONSTANTIN

By Ludovic Halevy

BOOK 1.

- CHAPTER I. THE SALE OF LONGUEVAL
CHAPTER II. THE NEW CHATELAINE
CHAPTER III. DELIGHTFUL SURPRISES

BOOK 2.

- CHAPTER IV. A RIOT OF CHARITY
CHAPTER V. THE FAIR AMERICANS
CHAPTER VI. A LITTLE DINNER FOR FOUR

BOOK 3.

- CHAPTER VII. CONFIDENCES
CHAPTER VIII. ANOTHER MARTYR TO MILLIONS
CHAPTER IX. THE REWARD OF TENDER COURAGE
-

A ROMANCE OF YOUTH

By Francois Coppee

BOOK 1.

- CHAPTER I. ON THE BALCONY
CHAPTER II. SAD CHANGES
CHAPTER III. PAPA AND MAMMA GERARD
CHAPTER IV. THE DEMON ABSINTHE

BOOK 2.

- CHAPTER V. AMEDEE MAKES FRIENDS
CHAPTER VI. DREAMS OF LOVE
CHAPTER VII. A GENTLE COUNSELLOR
CHAPTER VIII. BUTTERFLIES AND GRASSHOPPERS
CHAPTER IX. THORNS OF JEALOUSY
CHAPTER X. A BUDDING POET

BOOK 3.

- CHAPTER XI. SUCCESS
CHAPTER XII. SOCIAL TRIUMPHS
CHAPTER XIII. A SERPENT AT THE FIRESIDE

BOOK 4.

- CHAPTER XIV. TOO LATE!

CHAPTER XV. REPARATION
CHAPTER XVI. IN TIME OF WAR
CHAPTER XVII. "WHEN YOUTH, THE DREAM, DEPARTS"

COSMOPOLIS

By Paul Bourget

BOOK 1.

CHAPTER I. A DILETTANTE AND A BELIEVER
CHAPTER II. THE BEGINNING OF A DRAMA
CHAPTER III. BOLESLAS GORKA

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER IV. APPROACHING DANGER
CHAPTER V. COUNTESS STENO
CHAPTER VI. THE INCONSISTENCY OF AN OLD CHOUAN

BOOK 3.

CHAPTER VII. A LITTLE RELATIVE OF IAGO
CHAPTER VIII. ON THE GROUND

BOOK 4.

CHAPTER IX. LUCID ALBA
CHAPTER X. COMMON MISERY
CHAPTER XI. THE LAKE DI PORTO
CHAPTER XII. EPILOGUE

JACQUELINE

By (Mme. Blanc) Therese Bentzon

BOOK 1.

CHAPTER I. A PARISIENNE'S "AT HOME"
CHAPTER II. A CLEVER STEPMOTHER
CHAPTER III. THE FRIEND OF THE FAY
CHAPTER IV. A DANGEROUS MODEL
CHAPTER V. SURPRISES
CHAPTER VI. A CONVENT FLOWER

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER VII. THE BLUE BAND

| | |
|---------------|---------------------------|
| CHAPTER VIII. | A PUZZLING CORRESPONDENCE |
| CHAPTER IX. | BEAUTY AT THE FAIR |
| CHAPTER X. | GISELLE'S CONSOLATION |
| CHAPTER XI. | FRED ASKS A QUESTION |
| CHAPTER XII. | A COMEDY AND A TRAGEDY |
| CHAPTER XIII. | THE STORM BREAKS |

BOOK 3.

| | |
|----------------|----------------------|
| CHAPTER XIV. | BITTER DISILLUSION |
| CHAPTER XV. | TREACHEROUS KINDNESS |
| CHAPTER XVI. | THE SAILOR'S RETURN |
| CHAPTER XVII. | TWIN DEVILS |
| CHAPTER XVIII. | "AN AFFAIR OF HONOR" |
| CHAPTER XIX. | GENTLE CONSPIRATORS |
| CHAPTER XX. | A CHIVALROUS SOUL |

THE INK STAIN

(Tache d'Encre)

By Rene Bazin

BOOK 1.

| | |
|--------------|------------------------|
| CHAPTER I. | THE ACCIDENT |
| CHAPTER II. | THE JUNIAN LATIN |
| CHAPTER III. | AN APOLOGY |
| CHAPTER IV. | THE STORY OF SYLVESTRE |
| CHAPTER V. | A FRUITLESS SEARCH |
| CHAPTER VI. | THE FLOWER-SHOW |
| CHAPTER VII. | A WOODLAND SKETCH |

BOOK 2.

| | |
|---------------|-------------------------------|
| CHAPTER VIII. | JOY AND MADNESS |
| CHAPTER IX. | A VISIT FROM MY UNCLE |
| CHAPTER X. | A FAMILY BREACH |
| CHAPTER XI. | IN THE BEATEN PATH |
| CHAPTER XII. | I GO TO ITALY |
| CHAPTER XIII. | STARTLING NEWS FROM SYLVESTRE |
| CHAPTER XIV. | A SURPRISING ENCOUNTER |

BOOK 3.

| | |
|----------------|----------------------------------|
| CHAPTER XV. | BACK TO PARIS |
| CHAPTER XVI. | A FISHING-TRIP AND AN OLD FRIEND |
| CHAPTER XVII. | PLEASURES OF EAVESDROPPING |
| CHAPTER XVIII. | A COOL RECEPTION |
| CHAPTER XIX. | JEANNE THE ENCHANTRESS |
| CHAPTER XX. | A HAPPY FAMILY |

FROMONT AND RISLER

By Alphonse Daudet

BOOK 1.

- CHAPTER I. A WEDDING-PARTY AT THE CAFE VEFOUR
CHAPTER II. LITTLE CHEBE'S STORY
CHAPTER III. THE FALSE PEARLS
CHAPTER IV. THE GLOW-WORMS OF SAVIGNY
CHAPTER V. HOW LITTLE CHEBE'S STORY ENDED
CHAPTER VI. NOON—THE MARAIS IS BREAKFASTING

BOOK 2.

- CHAPTER VII. THE TRUE PEARL AND THE FALSE
CHAPTER VIII. THE BREWERY ON THE RUE BLONDEL
CHAPTER IX. AT SAVIGNY
CHAPTER X. SIGISMOND PLANUS TREMBLES FOR HIS CASH-BOX
CHAPTER XI. THE INVENTORY
CHAPTER XII. A LETTER
CHAPTER XIII. THE JUDGE

BOOK 3.

- CHAPTER XIV. EXPLANATION
CHAPTER XV. POOR LITTLE MAM'ZELLE ZIZI
CHAPTER XVI. THE WAITING-ROOM
CHAPTER XVII. AN ITEM OF NEWS
CHAPTER XVIII. SHE PROMISED NOT TO TRY AGAIN
CHAPTER XIX. APPROACHING CLOUDS
CHAPTER XX. REVELATIONS

BOOK 4.

- CHAPTER XXI. THE DAY OF RECKONING
CHAPTER XXII. THE NEW EMPLOYEE OF THE HOUSE OF FROMONT
CHAPTER XXIII. CAFE CHANTANT
CHAPTER XXIV. SIDONIE'S VENGEANCE
-

GERFAUT

By Charles de Bernard

BOOK 1.

- CHAPTER I. THE TRAVELLER
CHAPTER II. THE CASTLE OF BERGENHEIM

CHAPTER III. A DIVIDED HOUSEHOLD
CHAPTER IV. THE GALLANT IN THE GARDEN
CHAPTER V. ART AND MUSIC

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER VI. GERFAUT'S STORY
CHAPTER VII. GERFAUT ASKS A FAVOR
CHAPTER VIII. A LOVER'S RUSE
CHAPTER IX. GERFAUT, THE WIZARD
CHAPTER X. PLOTS
CHAPTER XI. A QUARREL
CHAPTER XII. AN INHARMONIOUS MUSICALE

BOOK 3.

CHAPTER XIII. MONSIEUR DE BERGENHEIM
CHAPTER XIV. GERFAUT'S ALLEGORY
CHAPTER XV. DECLARATION OF WAR
CHAPTER XVI. GERFAUT WINS A POINT
CHAPTER XVII. A RUDE INTERRUPTION
CHAPTER XVIII. ESPIONAGE
CHAPTER XIX. THE REVELATION

BOOK 4.

CHAPTER XX. MARILLAC TELLS A STORY
CHAPTER XXI. A STRATAGEM
CHAPTER XXII. THE CRISIS
CHAPTER XXIII. THE AGREEMENT
CHAPTER XXIV. A FRIEND'S ADVICE
CHAPTER XXV. THE WILD BOAR
CHAPTER XXVI. BERGENHEIM'S REVENGE

CONSCIENCE

By Hector Malot

BOOK 1.

CHAPTER I. THE REUNION
CHAPTER II. THE RICH MAN'S REFUSAL
CHAPTER III. A LAST RESORT
CHAPTER IV. 'TWIXT THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA
CHAPTER V. A CHARMING VISITOR
CHAPTER VI. A SWEET CONSOLER
CHAPTER VII. A LITTLE DINNER FOR TWO
CHAPTER VIII. EXPLANATIONS
CHAPTER IX. CAFFIE'S ANSWER
CHAPTER X. SANIEL MAKES A RESOLUTION

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER XI. THE INSTRUMENT OF DEATH
CHAPTER XII. THE CRUCIAL MOMENT
CHAPTER XIII. DISTRACTION

| | |
|----------------|-------------------------------|
| CHAPTER XIV. | THE EXAMINATION |
| CHAPTER XV. | A NEW PLAN |
| CHAPTER XVI. | THE SMILES OF FORTUNE |
| CHAPTER XVII. | PHILLIS'S FEARS |
| CHAPTER XVIII. | A GRAVE DISCUSSION |
| CHAPTER XIX. | THE KNOCK AT THE DOOR |
| CHAPTER XX. | A TIGHTENING CHAIN |
| CHAPTER XXI. | "REGARDING THE CAFFIE AFFAIR" |
| CHAPTER XXII. | NOUGAREDE'S BRIDE |
| CHAPTER XXIII. | STUNNING NEWS |

BOOK 3.

| | |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| CHAPTER XXIV. | HEDGING |
| CHAPTER XXV. | DANGEROUS DETAILS |
| CHAPTER XXVI. | A GOOD MEMORY |
| CHAPTER XXVII. | A NEW PERIL |
| CHAPTER XXVIII. | SANIEL VISITS A BARBER |
| CHAPTER XXIX. | A BROKEN NEGATIVE |
| CHAPTER XXX. | PHILLIS PRECIPITATES MATTERS |
| CHAPTER XXXI. | THE APPOINTMENT |
| CHAPTER XXXII. | THE FATAL LIGHT |
| CHAPTER XXXIII. | SUSPENSE |
| CHAPTER XXXIV. | ON THE RACK |
| CHAPTER XXXV. | A SECOND VICTIM |

BOOK 4.

| | |
|------------------|---------------------------|
| CHAPTER XXXVI. | CONSCIENCE ASSERTS ITSELF |
| CHAPTER XXXVII. | ATTEMPTED REPARATION |
| CHAPTER XXXVIII. | THE IMPORTANT QUESTION |
| CHAPTER XXXIX. | CONCESSION TO CONSCIENCE |
| CHAPTER XL. | PHILLIS IS SURPRISED |
| CHAPTER XLI. | A TROUBLED SOUL |
| CHAPTER XLII. | THE POWER OF HYPNOTISM |
| CHAPTER XLIII. | THE TERRIBLE REVELATION |
| CHAPTER XLIV. | AFTER LONG YEARS |

MADAME CHRYSANTHEME

By Pierre Loti

BOOK 1.

| | |
|---------------|------------------------|
| CHAPTER I. | THE MYSTERIOUS LAND |
| CHAPTER II. | STRANGE SCENES |
| CHAPTER III. | THE GARDEN OF FLOWERS |
| CHAPTER IV. | CHOOSING A BRIDE |
| CHAPTER V. | A FANTASTIC MARRIAGE |
| CHAPTER VI. | MY NEW MENAGE |
| CHAPTER VII. | THE LADIES OF THE FANS |
| CHAPTER VIII. | THE NECESSARY VEIL |
| CHAPTER IX. | MY PLAYTHING |
| CHAPTER X. | NOCTURNAL TERRORS |

CHAPTER XI. A GAME OF ARCHERY

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER XII. HAPPY FAMILIES!
CHAPTER XIII. OUR "VERY TALL FRIEND"
CHAPTER XIV. OUR PIOUS HOSTS
CHAPTER XV.
CHAPTER XVI. SLEEPING JAPAN
CHAPTER XVII. THE SONG OF THE CICALA
CHAPTER XVIII. MY FRIEND AND MY DOLL
CHAPTER XIX. MY JAPANESE RELATIVES
CHAPTER XX. A DEAD FAIRY
CHAPTER XXI. ANCIENT TOMBS
CHAPTER XXII. DAINY DISHES FOR A DOLL
CHAPTER XXIII. A FANTASTIC FUNERAL
CHAPTER XXIV. SOCIABILITY
CHAPTER XXV. UNWELCOME GUESTS
CHAPTER XXVI. A QUIET SMOKE
CHAPTER XXVII. THE PRAYERFUL MADAME PRUNE
CHAPTER XXVIII. A DOLL'S CORRESPONDENCE
CHAPTER XXIX. SUDDEN SHOWERS
CHAPTER XXX. A LITTLE DOMESTIC DIFFICULTY
CHAPTER XXXI. BUTTERFLIES AND BEETLES
CHAPTER XXXII. STRANGE YEARNINGS
CHAPTER XXXIII. A GENEROUS HUSBAND

BOOK 3.

CHAPTER XXXIV. THE FEAST OF THE TEMPLE
CHAPTER XXXV. THROUGH A MICROSCOPE
CHAPTER XXXVI. MY NAUGHTY DOLL
CHAPTER XXXVII. COMPLICATIONS
CHAPTER XXXVIII. THE HEIGHT OF SOCIABILITY!
CHAPTER XXXIX. A LADY OF JAPAN
CHAPTER XL. OUR FRIENDS THE BONZES
CHAPTER XLI. AN UNEXPECTED CALL
CHAPTER XLII. AN ORIENTAL VISION
CHAPTER XLIII. THE CATS AND THE DOLLS
CHAPTER XLIV. TENDER MINISTRATIONS
CHAPTER XLV. TWO FAIR ARISTOCRATS
CHAPTER XLVI. GRAVE SUSPICIONS

BOOK 4.

CHAPTER XLVII. A MIDNIGHT ALARM
CHAPTER XLVIII. UNUSUAL HOSPITALITY
CHAPTER XLIX. RUMORS OF DEPARTURE
CHAPTER L. A DOLLS' DUET
CHAPTER LI. THE LAST DAY
CHAPTER LII. "FAREWELL!"
CHAPTER LIII. OFF FOR CHINA
CHAPTER LIV. A FADING PICTURE
CHAPTER LV. A WITHERED LOTUS-FLOWER

By Emile Souvestre

BOOK 1.

- CHAPTER I. NEW-YEAR'S GIFTS
CHAPTER II. THE CARNIVAL
CHAPTER III. WHAT WE MAY LEARN BY LOOKING OUT OF WINDOW
CHAPTER IV. LET US LOVE ONE ANOTHER
CHAPTER V. COMPENSATION

BOOK 2.

- CHAPTER VI. UNCLE MAURICE
CHAPTER VII. THE PRICE OF POWER AND THE WORTH OF FAME
CHAPTER VIII. MISANTHROPY AND REPENTANCE
CHAPTER IX. THE FAMILY OF MICHAEL AROUT

BOOK 3.

- CHAPTER X. OUR COUNTRY
CHAPTER XI. MORAL USE OF INVENTORIES
CHAPTER XII. THE END OF THE YEAR

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1905

BY ROBERT ARNOT

The editor-in-chief of the *Maison Mazarin*—a man of letters who cherishes an enthusiastic yet discriminating love for the literary and artistic glories of France—formed within the last two years the great project of collecting and presenting to the vast numbers of intelligent readers of whom *New World* boasts a series of those great and undying romances which, since 1784, have received the crown of merit awarded by the French Academy—that coveted assurance of immortality in letters and in art.

In the presentation of this serious enterprise for the criticism and official sanction of The Academy, 'en seance', was included a request that, if possible, the task of writing a preface to the series should be undertaken by me. Official sanction having been bestowed upon the plan, I, as the accredited officer of the French Academy, convey to you its hearty appreciation, endorsement, and sympathy with a project so nobly artistic. It is also my duty, privilege, and pleasure to point out, at the request of my brethren, the peculiar importance and lasting value of this series to all who would know the inner life of a people whose greatness no turns of fortune have been able to diminish.

In the last hundred years France has experienced the most terrible vicissitudes, but, vanquished or victorious, triumphant or abased, never has she lost her peculiar gift of attracting the curiosity of the world. She interests every living being, and even those who do not love her desire to know her. To this peculiar attraction which radiates from her, artists and men of letters can well bear witness, since it is to literature and to the arts, before all, that France owes such living and lasting power. In every quarter of the civilized world there are distinguished writers, painters, and eminent musicians, but in France they exist in greater numbers than elsewhere. Moreover, it is universally conceded that French writers and artists have this particular and praiseworthy quality: they are most accessible to people of other countries. Without losing their national characteristics, they possess the happy gift of universality. To speak of

letters alone: the books that Frenchmen write are read, translated, dramatized, and imitated everywhere; so it is not strange that these books give to foreigners a desire for a nearer and more intimate acquaintance with France.

Men preserve an almost innate habit of resorting to Paris from almost every quarter of the globe. For many years American visitors have been more numerous than others, although the journey from the United States is long and costly. But I am sure that when for the first time they see Paris—its palaces, its churches, its museums—and visit Versailles, Fontainebleau, and Chantilly, they do not regret the travail they have undergone. Meanwhile, however, I ask myself whether such sightseeing is all that, in coming hither, they wish to accomplish. Intelligent travellers—and, as a rule, it is the intelligent class that feels the need of the educative influence of travel—look at our beautiful monuments, wander through the streets and squares among the crowds that fill them, and, observing them, I ask myself again: Do not such people desire to study at closer range these persons who elbow them as they pass; do they not wish to enter the houses of which they see but the facades; do they not wish to know how Parisians live and speak and act by their firesides? But time, alas! is lacking for the formation of those intimate friendships which would bring this knowledge within their grasp. French homes are rarely open to birds of passage, and visitors leave us with regret that they have not been able to see more than the surface of our civilization or to recognize by experience the note of our inner home life.

How, then, shall this void be filled? Speaking in the first person, the simplest means appears to be to study those whose profession it is to describe the society of the time, and primarily, therefore, the works of dramatic writers, who are supposed to draw a faithful picture of it. So we go to the theatre, and usually derive keen pleasure therefrom. But is pleasure all that we expect to find? What we should look for above everything in a comedy or a drama is a representation, exact as possible, of the manners and characters of the *dramatis persona* of the play; and perhaps the conditions under which the play was written do not allow such representation. The exact and studied portrayal of a character demands from the author long preparation, and cannot be accomplished in a few hours. From the first scene to the last, each tale must be posed in the author's mind exactly as it will be proved to be at the end. It is the author's aim and mission to place completely before his audience the souls of the "agonists" laying bare the complications of motive, and throwing into relief the delicate shades of motive that sway them. Often, too, the play is produced before a numerous audience—an audience often distraught, always pressed for time, and impatient of the least delay. Again, the public in general require that they shall be able to understand without difficulty, and at first thought, the characters the author seeks to present, making it necessary that these characters be depicted from their most salient sides—which are too often vulgar and unattractive.

In our comedies and dramas it is not the individual that is drawn, but the type. Where the individual alone is real, the type is a myth of the imagination—a pure invention. And invention is the mainspring of the theatre, which rests purely upon illusion, and does not please us unless it begins by deceiving us.

I believe, then, that if one seeks to know the world exactly as it is, the theatre does not furnish the means whereby one can pursue the study. A far better opportunity for knowing the private life of a people is available through the medium of its great novels. The novelist deals with each person as an individual. He speaks to his reader at an hour when the mind is disengaged from worldly affairs, and he can add without restraint every detail that seems needful to him to complete the rounding of his story. He can return at will, should he choose, to the source of the plot he is unfolding, in order that his reader may better understand him; he can emphasize and dwell upon those details which an audience in a theatre will not allow.

The reader, being at leisure, feels no impatience, for he knows that he can at any time lay down or take up the book. It is the consciousness of this privilege that gives him patience, should he encounter a dull page here or there. He may hasten or delay his reading, according to the interest he takes in his romance-nay, more, he can return to the earlier pages, should he need to do so, for a better comprehension of some obscure point. In proportion as he is attracted and interested by the romance, and also in the degree of concentration with which he reads it, does he grasp better the subtleties of the narrative. No shade of character drawing escapes him. He realizes, with keener appreciation, the most delicate of human moods, and the novelist is not compelled to introduce the characters to him, one by one, distinguishing them only by

the most general characteristics, but can describe each of those little individual idiosyncrasies that contribute to the sum total of a living personality.

When I add that the dramatic author is always to a certain extent a slave to the public, and must ever seek to please the passing taste of his time, it will be recognized that he is often, alas! compelled to sacrifice his artistic leanings to popular caprice—that is, if he has the natural desire that his generation should applaud him.

As a rule, with the theatre-going masses, one person follows the fads or fancies of others, and individual judgments are too apt to be irresistibly swayed by current opinion. But the novelist, entirely independent of his reader, is not compelled to conform himself to the opinion of any person, or to submit to his caprices. He is absolutely free to picture society as he sees it, and we therefore can have more confidence in his descriptions of the customs and characters of the day.

It is precisely this view of the case that the editor of the series has taken, and herein is the *raison d'être* of this collection of great French romances. The choice was not easy to make. That form of literature called the romance abounds with us. France has always loved it, for French writers exhibit a curiosity—and I may say an indiscretion—that is almost charming in the study of customs and morals at large; a quality that induces them to talk freely of themselves and of their neighbors, and to set forth fearlessly both the good and the bad in human nature. In this fascinating phase of literature, France never has produced greater examples than of late years.

In the collection here presented to American readers will be found those works especially which reveal the intimate side of French social life—works in which are discussed the moral problems that affect most potently the life of the world at large. If inquiring spirits seek to learn the customs and manners of the France of any age, they must look for it among her crowned romances. They need go back no farther than Ludovic Halevy, who may be said to open the modern epoch. In the romantic school, on its historic side, Alfred de Vigny must be looked upon as supreme. De Musset and Anatole France may be taken as revealing authoritatively the moral philosophy of nineteenth-century thought. I must not omit to mention the Jacqueline of Th. Bentzon, and the "Attic" Philosopher of Emile Souvestre, nor the great names of Loti, Claretie, Coppe, Bazin, Bourget, Malot, Droz, De Massa, and last, but not least, our French Dickens, Alphonse Daudet. I need not add more; the very names of these "Immortals" suffice to commend the series to readers in all countries.

One word in conclusion: America may rest assured that her students of international literature will find in this series of 'ouvrages couronnées' all that they may wish to know of France at her own fireside—a knowledge that too often escapes them, knowledge that embraces not only a faithful picture of contemporary life in the French provinces, but a living and exact description of French society in modern times. They may feel certain that when they have read these romances, they will have sounded the depths and penetrated into the hidden intimacies of France, not only as she is, but as she would be known.

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