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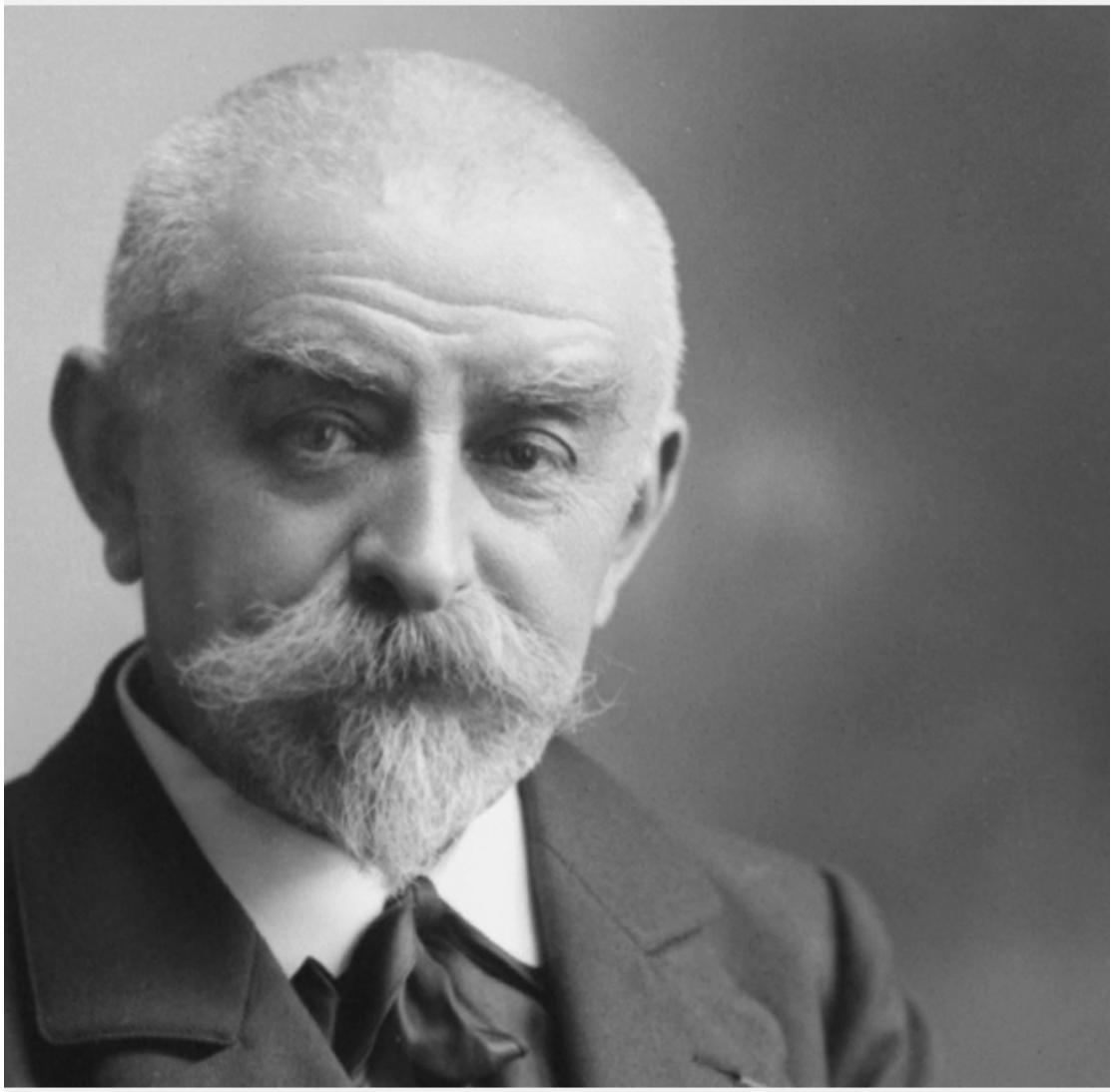
Joris-Karl Huysmans

Collected Works



Series Fifteen

The Collected Works of

JORIS-KARL HUYSMANS

(1848-1907)

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Version 1

The Collected Works of

JORIS-KARL HUYSMANS

By Delphi Classics, 2025

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Collected Works of Joris-Karl Huysmans

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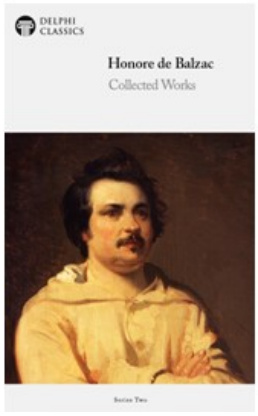
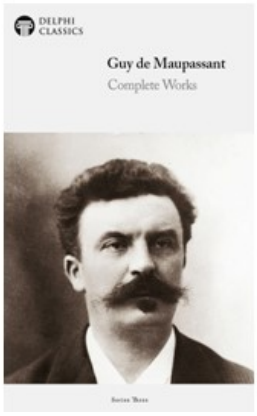
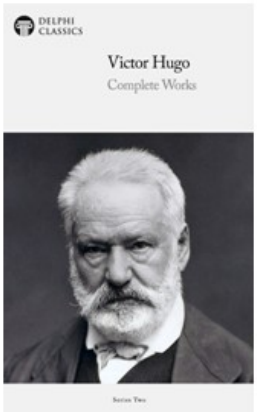
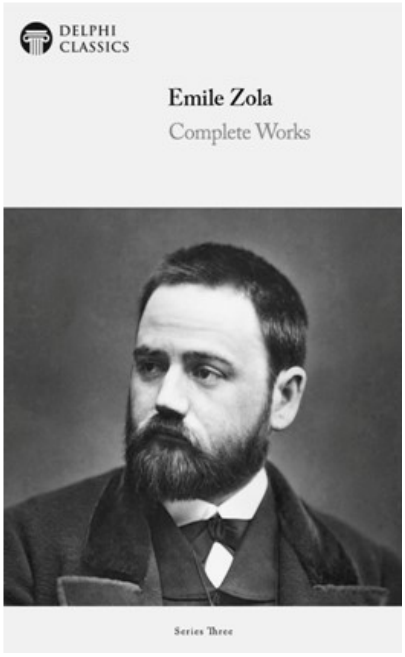
FRENCH MASTERS









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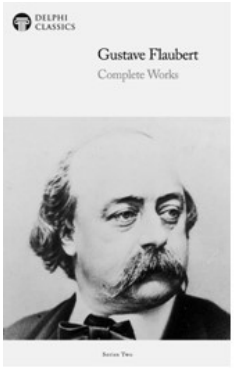
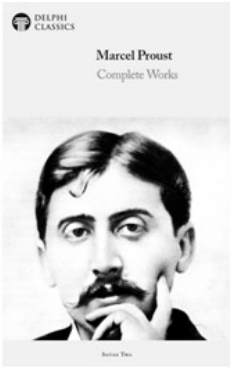
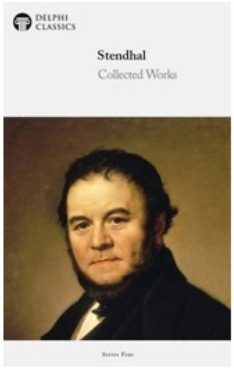
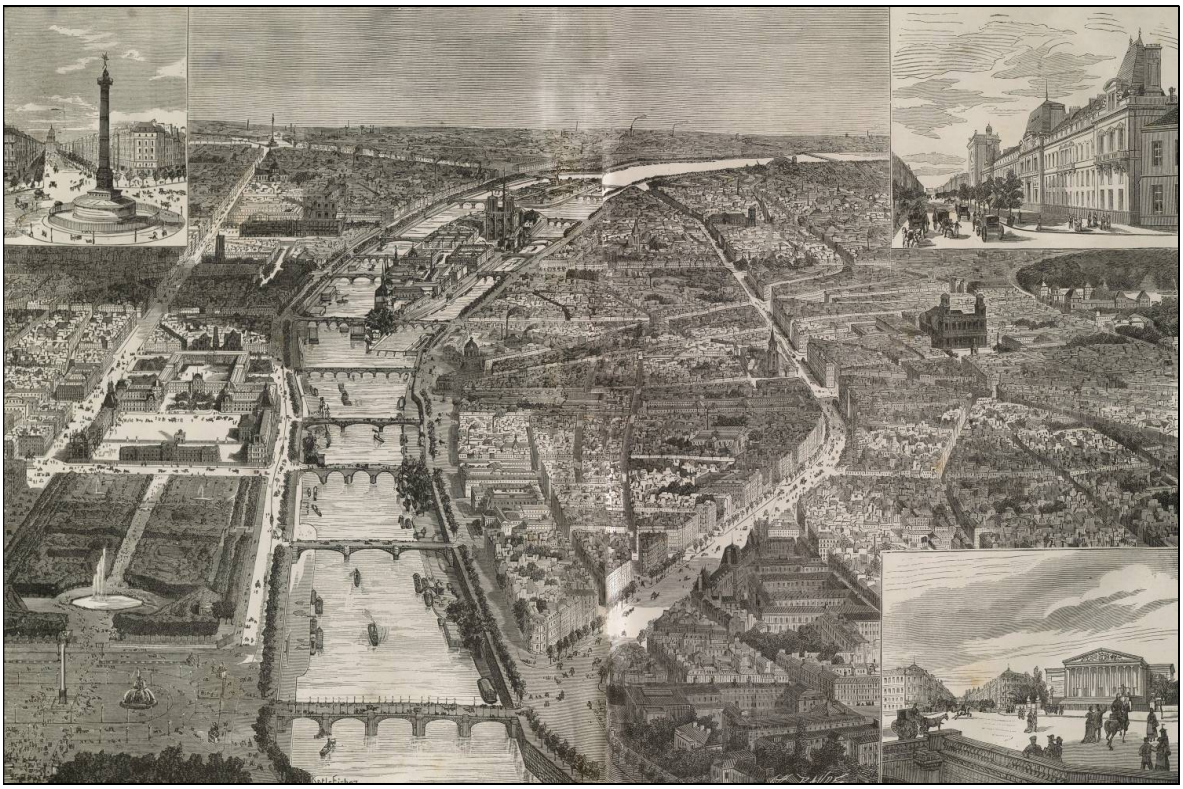






The Novels



Bird's-eye view of Paris in 1878 — Joris-Karl Huysmans was born in Paris in 1848.

La rue Suger, 6th arrondissement of Paris — Huysmans' birthplace

Marthe (1876)

A GIRL OF THE STREETS

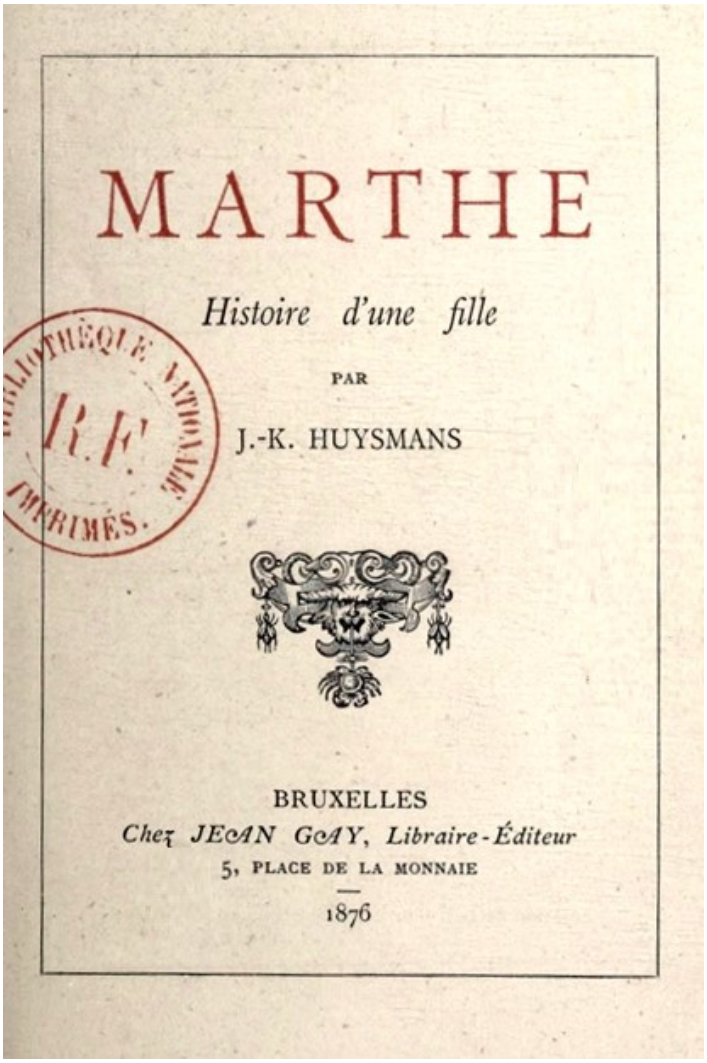
Original French Title: 'Marthe, histoire d'une fille'

Translated by Samuel Putnam, 1927

Joris-Karl Huysmans was born in Paris in 1848 to Victor-Godfried-Jan Huysmans, a Dutch immigrant, and Élisabeth-Malvina Badin Huysmans, a former schoolteacher. His father died when Huysmans was eight years old and his mother quickly remarried. Huysmans resented his stepfather, Jules Og, a Protestant who, with Huysmans' mother, purchased a bookbindery on the ground floor of the building where they lived. During his childhood, Huysmans turned away from the Roman Catholic Church. He was unhappy at school, but managed to earn a baccalauréat. For thirty-two years, he toiled as a civil servant for the French Ministry of the Interior — a position that he found tedious. His passion was for all things literary and he started to submit stories and articles for the Parisien periodicals.

At the age of twenty-eight, he wrote his first novel, *Marthe, Histoire d'une fille*. It was published in Brussels by Jean Gay in September 1876. Huysmans attempted to import hundreds of copies into France, but they were seized and confiscated by customs and the book was banned by the censors from entering the country. The novel was one of the earliest works in French literature to provide a detailed and realistic depiction of state-regulated prostitution during the nineteenth century. It was published shortly before Edmond de Goncourt's 1877 novel about a prostitute, *La Fille Elisa*; and Émile Zola's *Nana* in 1880. Huysmans sent copies of the work to Goncourt and Zola, both of whom he admired; he received muted approval from the former, but effusive praise from Zola, who soon became a friend and mentor to him.

The novel centred on a young woman who is, at different points in the story, an actress in a struggling theatre company, a prostitute in a government licensed brothel and a poorly paid worker in an artificial pearl factory. Huysmans describes the squalor, degradation and hardship of Marthe's life in forensic and painstaking detail. *Marthe* is an example of naturalism: a literary genre and philosophy, which maintained that heredity characteristics combined with social and environmental conditions were inescapable forces determining a person's character and future. In his seminal 1880 essay 'The Experimental Novel', Zola argued that the scientific experiential method should be applied to novels and drama. He created the most famous works of the naturalist genre with his twenty-part 'Les Rougon-Macquart' cycle published between 1871 and 1893.



The first edition

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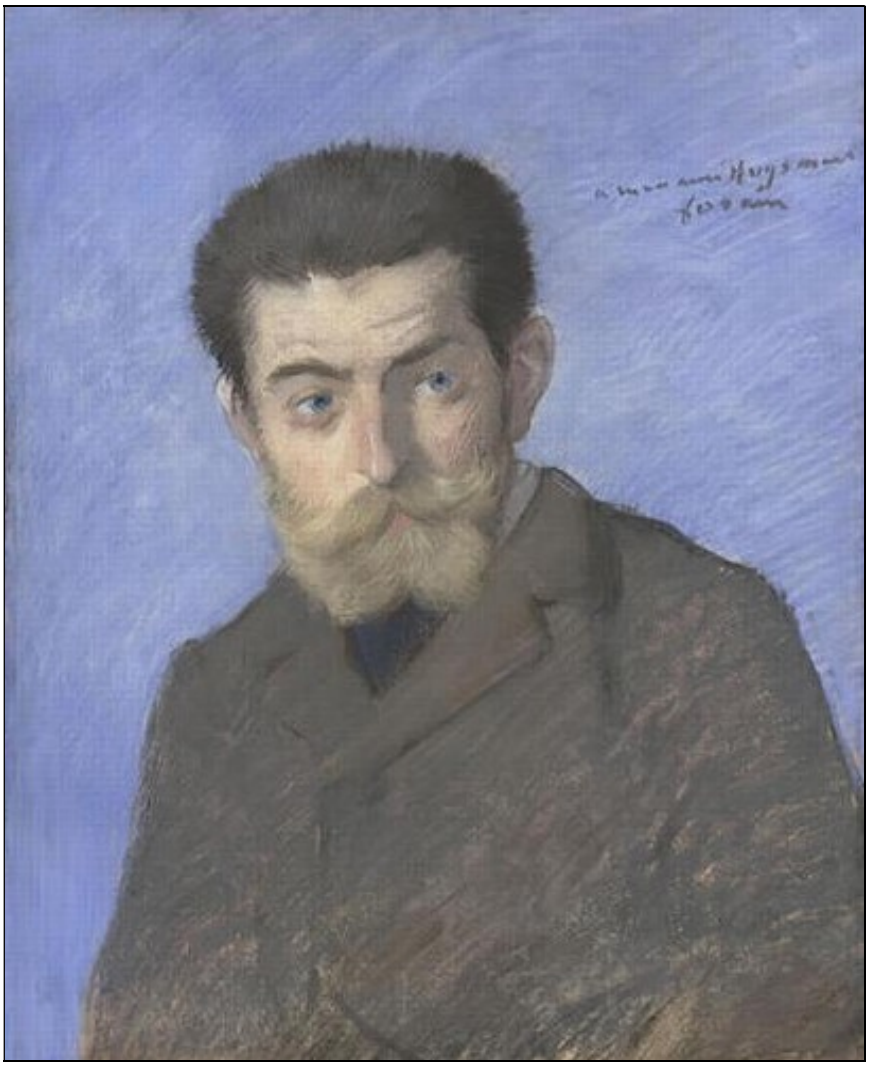

Jean-Louis Forain's portrait of Huysmans, executed close to the time of his first novel's publication

Émile Zola, close to the time of publication

"*I write what I see, what I feel and what I have lived through, the best I can, and that is all there is to it.*"

Foreword to MARTHE

FOREWORD

PRINTED AT BRUSSELS for Jean Gay, Publisher, the 12th day of September, 1876, by Felix Callewaert, père, Printer," this book was placed on sale the 1st of October following, at Brussels. About the middle of the month of August of the same year I found myself in that city, having come there to supervise the printing of *Marthe,* when I learned that M. de Goncourt was about to publish a novel the subject of which was somewhat like my own: *la Ville Elisa.* I may add that the rumors announcing the appearance of this book for the 1st of November, 1876, proved to be false, since *la Fille Elisa* was not placed on sale until the 20th of March, 1877, at Paris.

However this may be, I was afraid of being anticipated, and so, hastening the printed toilet of *Marthe,* I caused to be inscribed upon its final page the birth certificate quoted above.

This volume, the first novel that I wrote, was exhausted in a few days. The high price which it soon attained did not permit its purchase except on the part of collectors of rare books. M. Derveau [Publisher of the second (first Parisian) edition of *Marthe,* 1879.] has thought that those persons who were interested in the *Soeurs Vatard* would, perhaps, like to be able to procure, without too much trouble, this naturalistic novel by the same author. Such is the motive which has lead to the French edition of *Marthe.*

I have had, I confess, the intention of making it over from top to bottom; it has seemed to me that I should write it now in a language less tortuous and easier to read, but I have decided that it was better for it to remain as it was, preserving its youthful defects and audacities. I have especially desired that no one should be able to accuse me of having changed a word since the subsequent appearance of the novel of M. de Goncourt.

I believe it would be useless to enter into any discussion at the present time regarding the subject which it has pleased me to treat here. The indignant clamors to which latter-day idealists have given vent since the appearance of *Marthe* and the *Soeurs Vatard* leave me unmoved.

I write what I see, what I feel, and what I have lived through, the best I can, and that is all there is to it.

This explanation is not an excuse; it is, simply, a statement of the end which I pursue in art.

I

"LOOK HERE, LITTLE one," said Ginginet, stretched upon the urine-colored velvet of the bench, "you haven't a bad voice, you are pretty, and you have a certain stage presence, but that's not all. Listen to me. Its an old ham, a roustabout of the provinces and abroad, who is talking to you, an old wolf of the stage, as steady on the boards as a sailor on the sea. Well! You're not popular enough yet with the mob! That will come, little dear, but you're not quite there yet with your hips, you don't come in quite right on the *boom* of the bass-drum. Look here, look at me, I've got legs like a pair of warped tweezers, arms like vine-stalks; when I open my mouth its like the frog of a wine-vat, and I am just about as light on my feet as a ton of bricks, but bingo! when the cymbal clashes, I shake a leg, rasp out the last word of the stanza, gargle a false note, and there you are; I've got the public in the palm of my hand. That's what you've got to do. Come on, warble your ditty, and I'll show you the fine points as you go along. One, two, three, attention, your daddy's got his auricular tube open, your daddy's listening."

"Here, Mademoiselle Marthe, here's a letter which the door-woman told me to hand you," said a big girl with a burr and a snivel in her voice.

"Ah! That's fine," cried the young one. "Look here, Ginginet, what I've just received. Nice, isn't it?"

The comedian unfolded the paper and the corners of his lips mounted to the flaps of his nose, revealing gums smeared with red and producing a crack in the mask of rouge and powder with which his face was varnished.

"It's in verse!" he exclaimed, visibly alarmed. "In other words, the one who sends it is some fellow without a sou. A well-to-do-gentleman doesn't send verse!"

The players had reassembled during this conversation. It was as cold as the north-pole that night, and the back-stage corridors, with their drafts of air, were glacial. All the actors were huddled about a coke fire that flamed in the chimney.

"What's that?" inquired an actress, insolently *décolletée* from head to foot.

"Hear ye," said Ginginet, and he read, amid general attention, the following sonnet:

TO A SINGER

A fife that *squalls and hisses with dry throat;*
Sniffling bassoon; an old man who tries to spit
His teeth down the trombone's neck; the violin?
It Sounds like an ancient rebeck's rasping note.

A mighty flageolet — on its beak you dote;
A surly cornet, a bass-drum like to split:
Such is, with a conductor very fit —
Tun-bellied, scrofulous, an ugly bloat —

The theatre-orchestra, which holds in check
A lady apt for any amorous list:
On you, my only love, my sole delight, this fleck.

Each night you follow— 'tis *your infamous duty;*
Eyes shut, arms down and mouth made to be kissed,
I see you smile on cads, O Queen of Beauty!

"And it isn't signed!"

"Listen, Ginginet, that's what you call handing the orchestra leader a sweet one; ought to show him those vers-s-es; that will take him down a peg, the old catgut-scraper!"

"Come, ladies, on the stage," cried a gentleman clad in a black hat and a blue macfarlane. "Take your places, the overture is beginning!"

The women arose, tossed cloaks over their nude shoulders, shook themselves with a collective shiver — and, followed by the men, who had interrupted their pipes or their bezique game, filed through the little door which gave access to the stage by way of the wings.

The fireman on duty was at his post, and although he was half-dead with cold, there were flames in his eyes when he saw what was under the petticoats of some of the danseuses scattered through this revue. The stage manager gave three taps, and the curtain slowly rose, revealing an auditorium filled with people.

There is no doubt that the more interesting part of the show was not upon the stage but in the auditorium. The theatre run by Bobino, commonly known as Bobinche, was not filled, like those of Montparnasse, Grenelle and other ancient suburbs, with working men who desired to listen, seriously, to a drama. Bobino had for clientele the students and the artists, a clamourous and mocking race if ever there was one. They had not come into this hovel, tapestried with cheap wall paper, to be transported by heavy melodramas or light revues; they had come to yell, to laugh and to interrupt the piece — in short, to be amused! And so, the curtain had barely risen when the brayings began; but Ginginet was not the man to be disturbed by a little thing like that; his long dramatic career had accustomed him to hoots and hubbubs. He graciously saluted those who interrupted him, entering into conversation with them and interspersing his line with jests addressed to the boisterous ones; in short, he ended by getting a hand for himself. The show however, went badly enough; it went lame from the second scene. The auditorium was once more in a tempest. It was particularly delighted by the entrance of an enormous actress with a nose pickled in a sea of fat. The musical passage ejaculated from the spout of this human tub was met with great reinforcements on the part of the audience, to the time of "*larifla, fla, fla.*" The poor woman was dumbfounded and did not know whether to hold her ground or to flee. And then Marthe appeared, and the uproar died down.

She was charming, in the costume which she herself had cut out of silk and moire remnants. A rose-colored cuirass seamed with false pearls, a cuirass of an exquisite rose hue, that tenuous, almost ethereal hue which is only to be found in stuffs from the East, encircled her hips, which could scarcely be contained within their prison of silk; with her helmet of opulently red hair, her titillating lips, humid, voracious, red, she was enchanting, irresistibly seductive!

The two most intrepid hucksters, who answered one another from orchestra pit to gallery, had ceased their cries; "The ring breaks, but your keys are safe, five centimes, one sou! Orgeat, lemonade, beer!" Sustained by the prompter and by Ginginet, Marthe was applauded excessively. As soon as her ballad was ended, the tumult broke out again, more furiously than ever. The painter seated in the lower stalls and the student in a red oil-skin, who was roosting up above in the "hen-house," bawled themselves hoarse in the finest fashion imaginable, with a wealth of jests and quibbles, to the great joy of the spectators, whom the piece was boring to tears.

Stationed at the foot-lights, near one of the wings, Marthe looked over the auditorium and asked herself which of these young fellows might have sent her the letter. But all eyes were turned upon her; all were blazing in honor of her throat; it was impossible for her to discover, among all these admirers, the one who had sent the sonnet.

The curtain fell without her curiosity being satisfied.

The following evening, the actors were in a surly humor; they were expecting a new outbreak, and the director who acted as stage manager, owing to the absence of funds, was promenading feverishly up and down the stage, waiting for the curtain to go up.

He was suddenly tapped on the shoulder and, turning, found himself face to face with a young man, who grasped his hand and, very calmly, remarked: “You’re quite well today, I presume?”

“But... but yes... not bad...and you?”

“Oh, so so, thanks. And now, let’s understand each other. You don’t know me, and I don’t know you. Well! I am a journalist, and I intend to write a wonderful article on your theatre.”

“Ah! Enchanted, ravished, I assure you! But for what journal do you write?”

“For the Monthly Review.”

“Don’t know it. When does it come out?”

“Generally every month.”

“Well... won’t you sit down?”

“Thank you, but I don’t think I’ll take advantage of your invitation.”

And the young man was already in the greenroom, where actors and actresses were chattering together.

He was a clever fellow, this newcomer! He said a friendly word to one, a friendly word to another and promised everybody a gracious article, especially Marthe, whom he gazed upon with so greedy an eye that she had little difficulty in divining the fact that he was the author of the letter.

He came back a number of days following and paid her court; the short of it was, he succeeded, one evening, in dragging her home with him.

Ginginet, who was watching the young man’s manoeuvres, fell into a furious rage, which he poured out in great torrents on the bosom of Bourdeau, his colleague and friend.

The two were seated at table in a wine shop of the obscurer sort, drinking a pint together. If the truth must be told, Ginginet had succeeded, since afternoon, in painting his gullet one of the liveliest of reds; it seemed that he had sand-dunes in his throat, which he was attempting to irrigate with great waves of wine. His head soon sank, little by little, over the table, until his nose dipped in his glass, and, without addressing his companion, who was snoring away more drunk than he, if anything, he belched forth into a monologue, stippled and minced by a series of starts and hiccups.

“Beast, that little one, nothing but a beast, ah! but yes! to take a lover, that’s all right, if he is rich; otherwise, better stick to Ginginet’s old mug — not handsome, that’s true — Ginginet — not young that’s also true — but an artist! An artist! And she prefers to him a sweetie who makes verses! a good trade to starve by! that’s plain enough, like my voice — not this evening though — I’m as hoarse as everything — that reminds me of the little song I used to sing at Amboise, when it storms! Hey! Bourdeau, listen here, I tell you glories, ah! — that song about “my wife and my umbrella.” Maybe they weren’t stupid, those stanzas! as if a baby-doll and a whalebone-landau were not the same thing! Both turn on you and both desert you

when it storms! Hey! Bourdeau, listen here, I tell you I was a father to her, the most generous of fathers, who didn't mind her winking an eye at the rich young fellows, but for the poor ones, the ones up a tree, like this one, faugh! Be blowed! the devil! I become a serious father then."

And moved to the point of tears, Ginginet emphasized his soliloquy with a vigorous blow of his fist on the table, which made the wine in his glass foam and spattered his old peeled mask of a face with large red drops.

"It's raining out doors, its raining in doors," he went on, "goodnight everybody, I'm going to bed. Hey! Bourdeau, hey! lazy bones! Get up, its your old pal calling you! The one who used to sing at Amboise, I don't know what tune anymore. — Ah! zounds! What a house and what a bank account I had then!

And what a misfortune! To think that all that is gone at the same time as my hair! As for you," he cried to the garçon, "here are a few live ones; better cover 'em; there are five pints to pay for and good luck to all good fellows! As for the bourgeois, fiddle sticks on them!"

And saying this, he grasped Bourdeau by the left arm. The latter stumbled out after him, in his old shoes, singing like a nightingale through his nose, inflating his belly like a drum, dangling his head like a wild boar and yodelling out, in a what-you-may-call-it voice, a eulogy of old coaches and strong wines!

End of Sample