THE CONTINENTAL CLASSICS. VOLUME V. PARISIAN POINTS OF VIEW

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LUDOVIC HALÉVY

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Trieste

LUDOVIC HALÉVY IN HIS STUDY, WITH HIS BLACK CAT ON THE TABLE

THE CONTINENTAL CLASSICS

VOLUME V

PARISIAN POINTS OF VIEW

BY

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE SHORT STORIES OF M. LUDOVIC HALÉVY

To most American readers of fiction I fancy that M. Ludovic Halévy is known chiefly, if not solely, as the author of that most charming of modern French novels, *The Abbé Constantin.* Some of these readers may have disliked this or that novel of M. Zola's because of its bad moral, and this or that novel of M. Ohnet's because of its bad taste, and all of them were delighted to discover in M. Halévy's interesting and artistic work a story written by a French gentleman for young ladies. Here and there a scoffer might sneer at the tale of the old French priest and the young women from Canada as innocuous and saccharine; but the story of the good Abbé Constantin and of his nephew, and of the girl the nephew loved in spite of her American millions—this story had the rare good-fortune of pleasing at once the broad public of indiscriminate readers of fiction and the narrower circle of real lovers of literature. Artificial the atmosphere of the tale might be, but it was with an artifice at once delicate and delicious; and the tale itself won its way into the hearts of the women of America as it had into the hearts of the women of France.

There is even a legend—although how solid a foundation it may have in fact I do not dare to discuss—there is a legend that the lady-superior of a certain convent near Paris was so fascinated by *The Abbé Constantin*, and so thoroughly convinced of the piety of its author, that she ordered all his other works, receiving in due season the lively volumes wherein are recorded the sayings and doings of Monsieur and Madame Cardinal, and of the two lovely daughters of Monsieur and Madame Cardinal. To note that these very amusing studies of certain aspects of life in a modern capital originally appeared in that extraordinary journal, *La Vie Parisienne*—now sadly degenerate—is enough to indicate that they are not precisely what the good lady-superior expected to receive. We may not say that *La Famille Cardinal* is one of the books every gentleman's library should be without; but to appreciate its value requires a far different knowledge of the world and of its wickedness than is needed to understand *The Abbé Constantin*.

Yet the picture of the good priest and the portraits of the little Cardinals are the work of the same hand, plainly enough. In both of these books, as in *Criquette* (M. Halévy's only other novel), as in *A Marriage for Love*, and the two-score other short stories he has written during the past thirty years, there are the same artistic qualities, the same sharpness of vision, the same gentle irony, the same constructive skill, and the same

dramatic touch. It is to be remembered always that the author of *L'Abbé Constantin* is also the half-author of "Froufrou" and of "Tricoche et Cacolet," as well as of the librettos of "La Belle Hélène" and of "La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein."

In the two novels, as in the twoscore short stories and sketches—the *contes* and the *nouvelles* which are now spring-like idyls and now wintry episodes, now sombre etchings and now gayly-colored pastels—in all the works of the story-teller we see the firm grasp of the dramatist. The characters speak for themselves; each reveals himself with the swift directness of the personages of a play. They are not talked about and about, for all analysis has been done by the playwright before he rings up the curtain in the first paragraph. And the story unrolls itself, also, as rapidly as does a comedy. The movement is straightforward. There is the cleverness and the ingenuity of the accomplished dramatist, but the construction has the simplicity of the highest skill. The arrangement of incidents is so artistic that it seems inevitable; and no one is ever moved to wonder whether or not the tale might have been better told in different fashion.

Nephew of the composer of "La Juive"—an opera not now heard as often as it deserves, perhaps—and son of a playwright no one of whose productions now survives, M. Halévy grew up in the theatre. At fourteen he was on the free-list of