

**AN ATTIC
PHILOSOPHER
IN PARIS**

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An Attic Philosopher in Paris by Emile Souvestre & William P. Tront

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EMILE SOUVESTRE & WILLIAM P. TRONT

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AN
ATTIC PHILOSOPHER
IN PARIS

BY
Emile Souvestre

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

William P. Trent, M. A.

T. Y. CROWELL & COMPANY

NEW YORK

1899

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INTRODUCTION.

SOUVESTRE'S best-known book belongs to a class of compositions that might be well denominated the "demi-classics." In the history of every literature certain books and authors challenge attention because of their long-continued popularity, but at the same time cause perplexity on account of the fact that authoritative criticism has made little or nothing of them. What the great public has enjoyed and continues to enjoy ought, it would seem, to be interesting and valuable; what the best trained and most impartial critics have almost uniformly passed over in silence ought not to be worth a busy reader's examination. Between these two quite natural judgments of a contradictory character the mind remains in a condition of suspense, and the literary work in question is sooner or later relegated to the class of the "demi-classics."

This is not the place to discuss the question how far critics are right or wrong in ignoring popular verdicts upon authors and books, or to inquire how long the conflict of opinion will keep up the life of a "demi-classic." Sometimes, as we know

through the case of the "Pilgrim's Progress," the critics are forced to give in, and the ignored or derided book becomes a veritable classic, but this consummation takes time and we are not concerned here with the literary opinions of future generations. We are more concerned with determining why *Un Philosophe sous les Toits* continues to win readers, but fails to attract the critics.

That it still finds readers is a fact easily proved. It is at least widely used as a text-book, it can be obtained in cheap editions, and translations of it are demanded. That the critics, on the other hand, pass it by in silence is clear from the fact that the two best recent manuals of the history of French literature that have been written by Frenchmen do not mention Souvestre or his most famous book, and that the same thing is true of the two best manuals written in English. Even in a lately published and minute study of the French fiction of this century, while Souvestre receives a perfunctory paragraph, his "Attic Philosopher" is not mentioned and he is said to be at his best in two books dealing with Brittany, one of which is not fiction at all! Clearly if these critics had been consulted Souvestre's sixty or more volumes would not have been issued in the famous cheap collection of Michael Lévy. But it is time to examine the author and his book for ourselves.

Émile Souvestre was born April 15, 1806, at Morlaix, in that conservative Brittany about which

he afterwards wrote so lovingly and well. He intended at first to be an engineer like his father, but the latter's death led to the abandonment of this idea and law studies were taken up which drew him to Paris at the age of twenty. As with many a young Frenchman before and since, his most important piece of luggage was a manuscript drama — a tragedy, which in 1826 was at least of contemporary interest, for its title was the "Siege of Missolonghi." He has himself given us a most pathetic account of his struggles to get this piece played even after it had been accepted by the Théâtre Français. Finally he fell ill — much as the Attic Philosopher did — and, smitten with home-sickness, returned to his native Brittany. He had, too, to support his mother, since his eldest brother had died. So he became first a bookseller's clerk at Nantes, then a school-master on a new system devised by a friend. In this latter occupation he had a partner whose sister he married, but wife and infant child died shortly and the partner did not prove a pleasant one.

Then he tried journalism at Brest, and wrote also for various journals, but he had strict principles and was at heart an educator. He therefore began teaching once more, first at Brest, afterwards in Alsace. But Paris still attracted him, for he was man of letters as well as teacher, and in 1836 he settled there with his family, for he had married again. His position had been more or

less assured by the publication of his sketches of Brittany, which quaint province he had been studying with loving care ever since fate had determined that he should not be a dramatic poet; and he won a livelihood and public respect by prolific and conscientious work in fiction. If he had been less prolific and less mediocre he would now be treated with more respect by the critics, but perhaps he would not have been any happier or any more useful.

This quiet life, marked only by the publication of book after book with a meticulous regularity that reminds one of Trollope, was broken into by the political disturbances of 1848. Souvestre was disappointed in his ambition to serve as a deputy, but his talents as an educator were brought into play in a training school for governmental officials and in a course of public readings designed for the dissemination of popular culture. The latter anticipation, on a modest but proper scale, of what has since been known as university extension, afforded him a very happy field for the exercise both of his genuine literary and educational powers and of his earnest moral zeal. He read selections from classical and popular authors to audiences composed mainly of workingmen, and he seems to have known how to combine instruction and entertainment in a very successful way. Ste. Beuve thought the new movement worthy of one of his *Causeries du Lundi* (21 janvier, 1850), and spoke of Souvestre's share in it with a respect