

**GERMINIE
LACERTEUX**

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Germinie Lacerteux by Edmond de Goncourt & Jules de Goncourt

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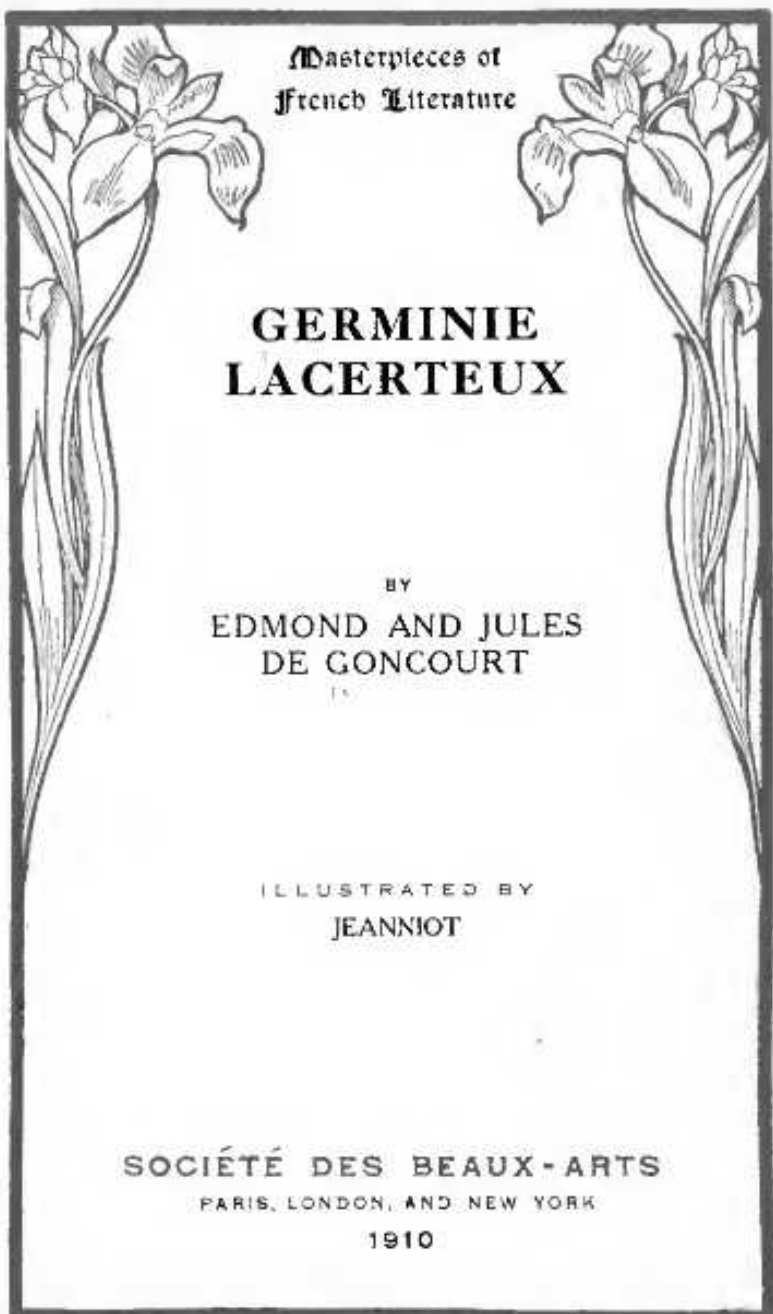
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EDMOND DE GONCOURT & JULES DE GONCOURT

**GERMINIE
LACERTEUX**



A decorative border of irises, with two large flowers at the top corners and long, slender leaves extending down the sides.

*Masterpieces of
French Literature*

**GERMINIE
LACERTEUX**

BY
EDMOND AND JULES
DE GONCOURT

ILLUSTRATED BY
JEANNIOT

SOCIÉTÉ DES BEAUX-ARTS

PARIS, LONDON, AND NEW YORK

1910

PREFACE

WE must ask pardon of the public for presenting them with this book, and warn them of what they will find in it.

The public like false novels: this novel is a true one.

They like books which have the appearance of being in society: this book comes from the street.

They like equivocal little works, girls' memoirs, alcove confessions, erotic uncleanness, the scandals exposed in the windows of the book-shops: what they are about to read is severe and pure. Let them not expect the low-necked photography of Pleasure: the following study is the clinic of Love.

The public further like to read what is soothing and comforting, adventures that end well, imaginings that disturb neither their digestion nor their serenity: this book, with its sad and violent diversion, is adapted to vex their habits and injure their hygiene.

Why, then, have we written it? Is it simply in order to shock the public and scandalize their tastes?

No.

Living in the nineteenth century, at a time of universal suffrage, and democracy, and liberalism, we asked ourselves whether what are called "the lower orders" had no claim upon the Novel; whether the people—this world beneath a world—were to remain under the literary ban and disdain of authors who have hitherto maintained silence regarding any soul and heart that they might possess. We asked our-

selves whether, in these days of equality, there were still for writer and reader unworthy classes, misfortunes that were too low, dramas too foul-mouthed, catastrophes too base in their terror. We became curious to know whether Tragedy, that conventional form of a forgotten literature and a vanished society, was finally dead; whether, in a country devoid of caste and legal aristocracy, the miseries of the lowly and the poor would speak to interest, to emotion, to pity, as loudly as the miseries of the great and rich; whether, in a word, the tears that are wept below could provoke weeping like those that are wept above.

These thoughts prompted us to venture upon the humble novel of "Sister Philomena" in 1861; they at present prompt us to publish "Germinie Lacerteux."

Now, though the book be slandered, this will be of little consequence to it. At the present time, when the Novel is widening and increasing; when it is beginning to be the great, serious, impassioned, living form of literary study and social inquiry; when, through analysis and psychological investigation, it is becoming moral, contemporary History—when the Novel has undertaken the studies and duties of science, it is able to claim the liberties and immunities of the latter. And if it seeks for Art and Truth; if, to the fortunate ones of Paris, it shows miseries that it is good not to forget; if it causes worldly people to see what ladies of charity have the courage to see, what queens used formerly to bring beneath their children's eyes in the hospitals—that present, living, human suffering, which counsels charity; if the Novel has that religion which the last century called by the wide, vast name of *Humanity*, the consciousness of this is sufficient for it, and implies its right.

EDMOND AND JULES DE GONCOURT.

EDMOND AND JULES DE GONCOURT

THEY were two brothers, Edmond, the elder, and Jules, the younger, with some ten years' difference in their ages. To-day Jules is dead and Edmond is over fifty. They never separated from each other until the dreadful day when the younger brother departed, taking with him half of the elder one. For twenty years they worked at the same table. Their collaboration was so natural that it is impossible to discover in their works the slightest effort or trace of it. The public had come to regard them as one being. Not a single line exists signed by Edmond or Jules alone—they ever appeared side by side, the one necessary to the other, their two talents blended into one. Criticism halted respectfully before the secret of this collaboration; it did not seek to assign to each brother his respective share. Moreover, collaboration in their case did not entail the shortcomings which frequently result. From the first line they wrote to the last there exists the same temperament, the same passion. Many works that have issued from a single brain do not possess a like admirable unity, an originality stamping each page with a never-to-be-forgotten trait. The day when death came, it did more than carry off a man, it overwhelmed another in his talent and his fame.

It is a painful story. The two brothers, abandoning the populous districts of Paris, where they suffered from the noise of the street, had sought refuge at Auteuil, in a quiet, charming, little house, which it had been their delight to

turn into a nook of labor and happiness. Fortune was smiling upon them—not that they were over rich, but they possessed that sufficiency of means which enables the artist to indulge his dream, to work when he pleases, without awaiting the pecuniary success of a book. Their little house was their hobby. They spent a large part of their income upon it. They embellished it—realized in it the oft longed-for retreat, with a garden planted with a clump of tall trees and blooming with roses—yellow roses, a superb plant of which festooned the drawing-room door. There they were in the open, at a few steps from the Bois de Boulogne, in light rooms filled with art treasure—living at the entrance to Paris, as though retired from the early ardors of the profession, and ready to produce masterpieces. And it was there, before they were really settled, when they had at length satisfied the desire for silence around their work-table, that death came and cast its shroud between them. The shock was terrible. For eight years Edmond has been dragging through the world wounded to the heart.

It was about 1860 that MM. de Goncourt published their first novel. In some ten years they wrote six. The attitude of the public towards these works has been full of bitter teachings. I have never met with a sadder example of the most perfect indifference for works of art. And yet, MM. de Goncourt were far from being unknown. They commanded a great sympathy. The critics busied themselves considerably about them—quite a fuss was made concerning some of their novels. Then these novels became lost as it were in the indifference of the reading public. It did not understand them, it felt bored as it pored over these pages full of such curious research and animated with such intense life. All this interfered with its habits. Moreover, there was the grand reason: they were immoral books, whom all respectable people should shun.

To tell the truth, the two brothers did nothing to attract the public; they did not flatter its tastes; they served it with bitter draughts which were very disagreeable after all the sweet things contained in the successful books; therefore, it is not at all surprising that the majority of the public held aloof. But artists possess the nerves of women: even when they do nothing to please, they long to be loved, and if they are not loved, they are very unhappy. MM. de Goncourt must have suffered much, like others of their contemporaries whom I do not care to name. The younger, Jules, died of the indifference of the crowd. The ill-success of their last novel, "Madame Gervaisais," pierced his heart with an incurable wound. Ah! what wretchedness. To be so far above and yet to die of the disdain of the low! To refuse to recognize folly and yet to be unable to exist without the applause of fools!

Their two first novels were "Sister Philomena" and "Charles Demailly," the one a picture of the hospital and the dissecting-room, the other a satire on the minor French journalists. Their third novel, "Renée Mauperin," is the one that most fully bears out the name, and by some is considered their masterpiece. Then came "Germinie Lacerteux," which I prefer to all others; "Manette Salomon," which is a free study on art and contemporary artists; and finally "Madame Gervaisais," which treats of a woman of great merit, who makes an unfortunate marriage and seeks refuge in work.

"Germinie Lacerteux" fixes a date in our contemporary literature. For the first time the lower classes are studied by writers who are masters of observation and style. And I repeat it is not a question of a more or less interesting story, but of a complete lesson of moral and physical anatomy. The novelist throws a woman on to the slab of the amphitheatre, the first woman that comes to his hand; the