

## Monsieur Got.

THE FATHER OF THE COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE.

BY THE BARONESS ALTHEA SALVADOR.



From a Photo. by]

M. GOT'S HOUSE.

[Benque & Co., Paris.



THE last night of January, 1895, witnessed the final appearance of the eminent actor, M. Got, who, since the 1st of November, had been performing the round of characters created by him during his half-century of service in the House of Molière. In 1842, M. Got obtained the second prize for comedy at the Paris Conservatoire, and in 1843 the first prize was his award. Then he entered the Comédie Française, and made his *début* as a domestic. His success was assured, and at that time even, his advancement would have been rapid had he not been obliged to serve as a soldier. After a short time spent in Algeria, he decided that he had more talent for the theatre than for the army.

"Yes," said the colonel, "you are right. Return to the theatre. Here you could not have risen very high, but on the stage you will never be anything."

This was not very encouraging, but Got had confidence in himself, and at an early period in his career created several rôles, among the most important of which was that of *Giboyer* in Emile Augier's "Fils de Giboyer."

Since then, Got's principal characters have been Jonquière's *Jean de Thomery*; the rabbi of "L'Ami Fritz"; *Maitre Pierre*, of "La Farce de Maitre Pathelin"; *Brissot*, of "Denise"; the grandfather, in "Flibustier";

and the priest, in "Il ne faut jurer de rien." But never was the great actor more applauded than in October last, when he created the part of *Bibus*, in Jean Richepin's "Vers la Joie." Bibus is the shepherd, doctor, philosopher of the piece, and here Got had an opportunity of declaiming the finest verses. He made us forget the actor and think only of real life. Got is the first member of the Comédie Française who has attained his fiftieth anniversary. Molé, Préville, Guérin, and La Thorillière all counted many years of service, but did not approach the half-century. On July 17th, 1894, the actors, actresses, machinists, and *employés* of the Comédie Française, in all eighty persons, celebrated, by a family breakfast at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, the fiftieth anniversary of M. Got's connection with the House of Molière. At the close of the *déjeuner*, M. Jules Claretie, the manager, made a brilliant speech. Mounet-Sully's remarks related to the wonderful career of the oldest *sociétaire*; Le Bargy, a favourite pupil of Got, read a touching essay; and Coquelin Cadet brought the "admiration of the absent."

The real dramatic career of Got dates from his performance of the priest in Alfred de Musset's "Il ne faut jurer de rien." Théophile Gautier wrote in 1848: "Got has made of this personage a living and animated silhouette, full of curious faults, and without caricature." When Got reached the zenith of his talent and reputation, he did not





From a Photo. by M. GOT IN 1876. [Nadar, Paris.

disdain to resume the characters in which he had made his early success. He has never been vain of his talent, but always proud of his art. A desire for effect has never lessened his good sense, and he has always been known as a "reasonable artist."

Indeed, the finish, the perfection of his art is not due to inspiration, but to premeditation. Got presents a curious and rare phenomenon—the union of profound logic and great imagination. But this imagination is only allowed play at intervals. It never dominates truth, the solid foundation of studies, pursued by every conscientious artist.

M. Got is professor at the Conservatoire, and on Mondays and Thursdays, the days on which he gives lessons, he rises at eight. At nine he mounts a Passy-Louvre omnibus, for he lives at a little suburb of Paris called Bonlainvilliers. Every omnibus conductor knows Got, for he never takes a cab: even after a performance at the theatre, when the applause has been most enthusiastic, he hastens to change his dress, so that he may not miss the last omnibus. Some of the actor's friends call this "principle"; others say he is actuated only by motives of economy. In spite of his effort at early rising on the day of his lessons (for he usually sleeps very late in the morning), Got is always late at the Conservatoire. However, he remains

there longer, in order to compensate his pupils for the time lost. His costume never varies: in winter, a loose redingote of broadcloth, and in summer a sack-coat of the same material. The hat is always silk, with broad, straight brim, pressed down to his nose. When he reaches the Conservatoire, he is respectfully saluted by his pupils; but he merely nods and waits impatiently until his assistant has called over the names. When the assistant has retired, Got says: "Well, my children, whose turn is it now?" Little by little, the actor becomes animated and witty, never hesitating to express his opinion, even when it is most unflattering to his pupils. Sometimes the actor goes to the theatre to advise young artists, sometimes to assist in mounting plays; and his opinion of manager, author, play, and artists is very frank—perhaps too frank for those criticised.

Got once told me that the former *administrateur*, Perrin, understood the Comédie Française, and knew how to manage actors and authors. "Jules Claretie is very amiable, but weak; he does not rule, but is ruled. I am fond of Mounet-Sully as a friend; but, as a comrade on the stage, he is too self-sufficient and too easily ruffled. Coquelin



M. GOT IN HIS GARDEN.—PRESENT DAY.  
From a Photo. by Benque & Co., Paris.





From a Photo. by]

M. GOT AS MR. POIRIER IN "LE GENDRE DE MR. POIRIER."

[Benque &amp; Co., Paris.

*ainé* should never have been taken back : the treasury has suffered thereby."

Got is not a talker, and never gossips with the actors and actresses. He is very conscientious ; he has a right to a certain number of seats at the theatre, but he never gives them to his friends, because that would lessen the receipts.

His dressing-room is very simply furnished : there is not a picture, not a drawing in it, but everywhere one sees swords. There are two tiny rugs, one for each foot, and a table with all the materials for "making up." When he is dressed, the actor leaves his room and strolls through the corridors, waiting until he is "called." He tells you that he is always frightened before going on the stage—that his heart beats violently ; but, after the first word, his calmness returns. After a scene, sometimes he is gay, and makes witty speeches in the corridors. At other times, he is melancholy, sits down and speaks to no one. Got cares very little for luxury. His home is as simply furnished as his dressing-room at the theatre, and during all these years he has only possessed one work of art—his own portrait by Carpeaux. It was painted by candle-light, and the artist's thumb replaced a brush. Its strength made so great an impression, that Haquette created a portrait of Got by *throwing* the paint on the canvas. This portrait is remarkably powerful, but does not belong to the actor.

Got has a wonderful library, and when he has not to go to the theatre, he smokes a pipe, and reads or works in the garden. He looks like a priest, and this resemblance to an ecclesiastic nearly cost him his life during

M. GOT AS THE RABBI IN "L'AMI FRITZ."  
From a Photo. by Nadar, Paris.





M. GOT AS BRIAC IN "UNE JOURNÉE D'AGRIPPA."

that I play the day after to-morrow." Unfortunately, he fell into the hands of the Communists.

"Who are you, and where are you going?"

"I am Got, of the Comédie Française, and I am going to London."

"You are not Got: you are the vicar of Sainte-Marie-des-Batignolles."

"I have never been a priest: see, I have no tonsure!"

But the poor actor was carried to the Place du Trône, and placed with the other prisoners in an improvised prison. At the close of day, the Communists took him out of prison, and said: "As you are an actor, recite something for us. Go on. Recite some verses." When he had finished, they said: "Perhaps you are Got; in any case, you are free."

The fact was that the commander was an Italian, and Got, speaking that language, was able to explain the situation, and thus save his life. Got never attempts to learn his parts. He reads them over two or three times, and, while reading, tries to form an idea of the personage he is to represent. He reflects about people whom he knows, chooses a characteristic from this one, another from that, and so composes his part. For example, the priest he impersonates in "Il ne faut jurer de rien" was a replica of the priest in his regiment. Got studied carefully this country abbé—simple, ignorant of the world—and, as a result, Parisians were presented with a priest of irreproachable taste, and delightfully true to nature.

Got says: "In order to succeed as an actor one must work very hard, and be the favourite of chance. Whenever a young man comes to ask my advice, I say, 'My friend, if you can do something else, do it; but do not enter upon a theatrical life.' But the young man never pays any attention to this advice, and that is one reason why so many actors fail. I never, or rarely, make a mistake in my judgment. As soon as one of my pupils recites a phrase, I know what he can do. It is the same with plays. Often I listen to the reading of a play at the Comédie Française out of respect for the author; but from the first scene I know if he be a dramatist. Only once have I been mistaken about the success of a play.

"When Scribe read us his 'Contes de la Reine de Navarre,' I was shocked, for the play seemed absolutely absurd. Scribe was then the fashionable author, and as I was obliged to vote after the reading, I thought, 'Everybody will put in a black ball, and there must be one ball in favour of Scribe, if only to please him: a white ball would be too flattering, so I will put in a red one!' Judge of my stupefaction when I found that mine was the only red ball—all the others were white! That play was represented a hundred times; but, in spite of its success, I have never modified my opinion. I have always thought that more was due to the talent of Madeleine Brohan than to the play itself."



M. GOT AS ARNOLPHE IN "ECOLE DES FEMMES."



It is interesting to know that the artist who recently celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his connection with the House of Molière once brought it into the law courts. In 1865, displeased at the regulations which imperilled the privileges and dignity of the association, and discouraged because his efforts to reform abuses were without avail, Got tendered his resignation. Its refusal was the cause of the lawsuit that resulted in Got remaining a *sociétaire*.

had been appropriated for the use of the Government, and great was the discontent of the students in the Latin Quarter. It was known that the Emperor and Empress would honour the theatre with their presence, and from pit to gallery the house was filled with students, who saluted Napoleon III. by singing "Luxembourg—Luxembourg," to the famous air of "Lampions"—a souvenir of 1848.

The courtiers were naturally irate, but the students bade adieu to the monarch with



From a Photo. by]

THE CAST OF "VERS LA JOIE" AT THE COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE.

[La Photographie Nouvelle, Paris

M. GOT, MMES. BARETTA AND PIERSON, MM. COQUELIN CADET, P. MOUSET, LE BARGY, LANGIER, AND ESQUIER.

Soon afterwards, Emile Augier wished Got to create a part in his new comedy, "Contagion," to be produced at the Odéon. Got's request to undertake the character was refused, but the Emperor ordered him to appear at the Odéon and create the part of *Lagarde* in the new play. "Contagion" caused great curiosity and much excitement, as it was rumoured that, in the character of *Baron d'Estrigant*, Augier had wished to depict the Duc de Morny. The play was represented just at the time when a portion of the Luxembourg Gardens

"Luxembourg—Luxembourg." The Imperial carriages were obliged to pass slowly through the Rue Corneille and the Rue de l'Odéon, while the police were unable to prevent a compact crowd from hissing and insulting the Emperor and Empress. Four years later came the end of the Empire, and hardly a voice was raised in its defence. Notwithstanding this disturbance, Emile Augier's comedy had a great success; but Got, eclipsed by Berton as the hero, returned to his old home, where he remained ever since.