

## A BOOK-SHELF FOR THE MONTH

IBÁÑEZ, HUYSMANS, AND  
GEORGE MEREDITH

*By Georgiana Goddard King*

"La Catedral", which Blasco Ibáñez wrote in 1903, bears a name identical with that of J. K. Huysmans's famous and prolix work, which, slightly preceding it, was third and next-to-last in the series that recounted the tenuous history of a shadowy person by the name of Durtal. What that did for Chartres, this does for Toledo, but with what a difference! It is true, however, that when the day comes that tourists tramp and crowd through Spain as they have long tramped and crowded through Italy and France, they will carry this to Toledo, or read it in preparation or in reminiscence, as we all have done with the other. There the parallel ends: where the psychology was unreal and the erudition factitious in that, in this the protagonist is a figure of immense and

complex interest, and the informing emotion of the work is sincere and strong.

The scene is laid among the poor folk who in both senses of the word live upon the cathedral: the vergers, sacristans, bell-ringer, and the like, who inhabit the range of odd little dwellings up above the cloister of the great church. Among them returns a relative—brother, cousin, nephew, in a family which has its own pride in its own honor as keen, and as justifiable, as the archbishop's. As a boy of great promise he had been admitted to the seminary, and for his zeal and fervor he had gone into the mountains in the Carlist rebellion; thence passing into the wide world he had become a sort of philosophical anarchist, and the gift which should have served him as a preacher made him an agitator, a wanderer, who carried a lamp in his bosom at which torches were lit. The miseries of his middle years, of the

life of a man whom the police are down on, whom governments are down on, are touched lightly, for they have little to do with the immediate action. But they anticipate very exactly some of the incidents which followed the Barcelona rising of 1909; and this history of Gabriel Luna offers parallels to that of the Catalan professor, Ferrer. Hunted and dying, he finds refuge at home, but like the Psalmist he cannot keep silence even from good words; and again he awakes to consciousness brutalized and perverted intelligences that he cannot control. His ending is piteous enough, but the end of the story is what he would have pronounced himself: that "the earth is enriched and made more fruitful for the renovation of life".

The cathedral itself has been studied as carefully as was ancient Sagunto, and the descriptions of it are memorable—the opening before daylight, the mass on Corpus Christi, the empty church in the night; but the author's dominant interest as novelist keeps description and ecclesiology in their due place, and subordinates everything to the development of the action. Even the great survey of Spanish history envisaged from an unusual angle, which occurs in the sixth chapter, and which will deserve the careful perusal of the intending tourist, plays its own part therein, and immediately affects the *dénouement*. As often in this author's work, the narrative is constructed not so much by incidents as by slow processes, and the successive scenes are oftener signs than causes of change. In the same way, ideas are conveyed not so much by epigrams as by cumulative effects: terse sayings there are, however, as that which declares that of all men the Spaniard practises the most of religion and thinks the least of it.

The style in sustained discourse is rich, various and noble without grandiosity; the long-set speeches are not oratorical. In familiar dialogue it is racy; the phrases sound in the ear, with the cadence of the spoken word.

It is the conscious strength of the author on the one hand, the power of his perfected art to lift action and character out of the distress of actuality, and on the other hand his confident faith, his trust in the healing and cleansing power of life itself and the laws of social development—recalling at times passages in the poetry of George Meredith—his charity toward all of humankind, as wide as nature's and no more unintelligent: it is this especial endowment of Ibáñez, as author and as advocate, which makes the book not in the last analysis either pessimistic or painful, but rather heartening.

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