

ASTORGA

“**N**O, you won't find much for your brush to do in Astorga, señor”—was the answer to a query addressed to a fellow passenger in the train. I fear he was not far wrong, though I knew with the Cathedral I should not be disappointed.

It was a wet evening, and I landed at the station in the dark ; gave my traps to a porter, and found myself after a tramp through the mud at the only Fonda in the place. My baggage was deposited in a sort of glorified cupboard containing a bed. The small window had no glass, and I discovered the next day that it opened on to the stables. I objected to these quarters, and later on in the evening my belongings were moved into a room just vacated by some one who had gone on to Madrid in *el rapido*.

The next morning I made my way to the Cathedral. It stands well and quite isolated, except for the “New Art” Bishop's Palace which is in course of erection. The Cathedral is late Gothic, built in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

CATHEDRAL CITIES OF SPAIN

on the site of a former church. The interior is lofty and very beautiful, though spoilt by a bad *trascoro* in execrable taste and quite out of keeping with the elegant columns of the nave. This consists of seven bays. The bases of the piers run up ten feet or more, and resemble the later additions to Leon Cathedral and those at Oviedo. The intersecting mouldings on them are the very last style of Gothic work and exemplify the beginning of a more florid taste. There is no triforium. The clerestory windows are of unusual height, as at Leon, and are filled with very fine glass.

The aisles are also very lofty. The chapels attached to that on the north have their vaulting carried up to the height of the aisle, a very unusual feature. All the windows on this side, with one exception, are blocked. In the south aisle the vaulting of the lateral chapels is low. The windows are glazed and contain good glass; and in the first chapel from the west is a very fine early German *retablo*.

The transepts are of one bay only. The south has perhaps the best glass in a Cathedral which is specially rich in this.

There is much good iron work in the different *rejas*, and the walnut *silleria* in the *coro* are exceptionally well carved. But the gem of the Cathedral is undoubtedly the magnificent *retablo*

ASTORGA

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ASTORGA

over the High Altar. Its author, Gaspar Becerra, was a native of Baeza, and studied in Italy under Michael Angelo. It is his masterpiece, and well merits this title. Of the fourteen panels, *The Disputation* and *Ascension* are the best. The exterior of this lofty church is much enhanced by its flying buttresses. The west façade is good Renaissance work, with flanking towers, only one of which is, however, finished. A flying buttress connects them with the centre of the façade as at Leon, in fact I could not help drawing comparison, when I knew them both, between these two Cathedrals.

The warm red stone of which this at Astorga is built has weathered most beautifully, and contrasts with the grey balustrade composed of figures holding hands—a very quaint device, by the way—which adorns the ridge above the clerestory. At the south-east corner, instead of the usual pinnacle, a huge weathercock stands. It is a wooden statue of Pedro Mato, a celebrated Maragato, in the dress of his tribe.

La Maragateria is a territory of small extent in the middle of which Astorga is situated. The inhabitants, the Maragatos, mix with no one. They live exclusively to themselves, preserve their costume and their customs, and never marry out of their own clan. The men hire themselves out as

CATHEDRAL CITIES OF SPAIN

carriers, the women stay at home and work. It is supposed that as they have many Arabic words still in use, they are a remnant of the Moorish occupation left behind when Christian armies finally swept the Infidel back into the south. This may be so, for the Moors are past masters at caravan work, and the Maragatos are the great carriers of Spain. When on the road their strings of mules take precedence, and everything clears out of their way. The men dress in loose baggy knickers and the women attire themselves in short red or canary-coloured skirts with green or light blue lining, one pleat remains open and shows either of these colours. They wear white stockings, black shoes, and very gaily-coloured handkerchiefs cover their heads. On a Sunday they swarm into the town, going off in the evening at sundown to their different villages in picturesque chattering throngs. Twice a year the whole tribe assembles at the feasts of Corpus Christi and the Ascension, when they dance for an hour, el Cañizo, a dance which if an outsider dare join in is immediately stopped.

I had heard a great deal of the dignity of the Spaniard, before I went to Spain, and had failed to find that this reputation was at all justified, except in the case of the *Guardia Civil*, until I came across the Maragatos. I found them to be among

ASTORGA

the most self-respecting and courteous folk that one could meet anywhere ; they certainly are amongst the most interesting of the many distinct tribes that people the Peninsula.

Astorga, the Asturia Augusta of the Romans, is described by Pliny as a "magnificent city." It was once the capital of southern Asturia and was always an important outpost fortress. As indicative of its strength I may mention that Astorga bears for arms a branch of oak.

Like Leon, the importance of its position as a base, both for those who lived in the mountains to the north and west, as well as for those who came from the plain, was always appreciated, and was for ever a bone of contention between the inhabitants of these districts. The Bishopric was founded in 747 by Alfonso el Catolico, but no man of note has ever been appointed to the See as far as I could discover. Indeed, Astorga is another of those old Spanish cities which are passed by in the train, with the remark—"How nice the old walls look, I do wish we had time to stop here."

A saunter round the walls I must own is very disappointing. It is so evident that but little veneration is felt, or respect shown, for any antiquities or historical associations. In many places they have been pulled about for the sake of the building materials they yielded. They are the

CATHEDRAL CITIES OF SPAIN

rubble heaps of Astorga and have fallen into sad decay. One portion is, however, preserved. In the south corner, where a pretty little *paseo* garden affords shade and a pleasant promenade, a splendid view is obtained "over the hills and far away." Here, at any rate, restoration has been undertaken for the sake of the common ground where men and women walk, as custom dictates, every evening.

At the spot where the Cathedral stands a great deal of demolition has taken place, and even to-day the huge new château-like palace of the bishop, now in process of erection, closes in a fine space and detracts from the little antiquity which is left in this corner of Astorga. Such is modern taste in Spain. Besides its walls, Astorga is celebrated for its *mantecadas*, small square sponge-cakes, neatly folded in pieces of greased paper, which find their way all over this part of the country; but the farther off you find them the less do they resemble the originals, and these are very good.