

LEON

SITUATED on the edge of the great plain which stretches away south to the Sierra de Gredos and beyond to Toledo, Leon served as a sort of buffer town between the Highlanders of the north and the dwellers on the Castilian uplands.

The headquarters of the seventh Roman Legion, from which the name is derived, it may be described as a great fortress of bygone days. Astorga, some thirty miles westwards, being an outpost in that direction no doubt helped to preserve Leon from the ravages of the Galician Visigoths.

The Romans held their fortress for five hundred years until Leovigild in 586 captured it after a long and strenuous siege. So highly was the position and strength of these two towns appreciated, that when Witiza, the King of the Goths, issued a decree levelling all defensive works to the ground, they were exempted and their fortifications preserved.

The Moors held Leon for a very short spell, and then only as a defence against northern invasion. When Ordoño I. descended from his mountain fastnesses and drove them out, Leon changed front

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with its new occupants, and became a stronghold to be held at all costs against invaders from the south.

The great Almanzor, in his victorious march north with the soldiery of Cordova, swept away all opposition and this buffer town was sacked. However, after his defeat at Calatanavor and subsequent death, the banner of Christ was once more unfurled to the breeze from what little was left of its walls.

These were almost entirely rebuilt of *tapia* and cob-stones by Alfonso V., since whose time they have remained or slowly fallen away.

Leon stands in a verdant pasture valley intersected by many streams and shady roads lined with tall poplars. The fields on either side are divided from one another by hedges and willow trees, thick scrub follows the streams and grows down to the water edge, and walking in these pleasant places it was not difficult to imagine myself back in England. The city itself is really little better than a big village, and considering the important part it has played in the history Spain, seems sadly neglected and left out in the cold. This, too, despite the fact that it is an important junction and railway centre. There are no buildings of any present importance, and those that once could lay claim to this are in a state of decay. It is only on Sundays and market days, when the peasants in picturesque costume and

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gay colours come in, that Leon can boast of the smallest animation. I remember one Sabbath evening as I stood on my balcony, that vantage ground from which one sees all the life of the place pass by in the street below, watching the folk parade up and down. A military band discoursed "brassy" music, the crowd was packed as tight as sardines in a tin, when suddenly the "toot, toot" of a motor horn was heard above the clash of cymbals and boom of the drum. A large car came down a by-street opposite, turned sharply and charged the crowd. The Spaniard is of an excitable temperament, loud cries of disapproval, and screams from the gentler sex drowned all else. The chauffeur discovered his mistake none too soon and attempted to turn the car. At this the uproar grew louder and he brought it to a standstill. Youths climbed the steps, boys hung on behind, "Toot, toot" went the horn; the bandmaster, with an eye to the situation, waved his *bâton* more energetically than ever, the big drum boomed, the trombones blurted out for all they were worth, but the hooting and whistling drowned everything.

At last the car began to back and became disengaged, the chauffeur adroitly turned, and started down the street followed by the noisier elements of the crowd eventually pulling up at a café, just out of the parade zone. In Leon as

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elsewhere, fashion dictates a limit to the walk in either direction and the chauffeur had stopped beyond this. The two occupants of the car got out in a very unconcerned manner, sat down at a table and ordered a drink. For at least a quarter of an hour, while these two were taking their coffee, the crowd stood round booing, whistling and shouting. I do not think I have ever seen anything cooler than the way in which, their thirst satisfied, and the account settled, they got up and walked slowly after the car which long ago had disappeared out of danger.

By this time, despite the presence of a couple of the *Guardia Civil*, the crowd was excited. A cart full of peasant folk next essayed the perils of the thoroughfare, they however got through safely after much badinage and fun. No sooner had they gone, the band meantime had vanished, when out from a wine shop came some peasants with castanets a little light-headed for once. There were four of them, two men and two women. They immediately began a dance on the pavement. A ring was formed and a storm of hand-clapping encouraged them, for ten minutes they footed it admirably. More castanets appeared from somewhere and soon half Leon was dancing in the middle of the Calle. The feeble-looking policemen, who had been terribly worried over the motor-car incident, thrust

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out their chests, or tried to, and beamed all over. The scene had changed from what had first looked very much like an ugly row, to one of pure enjoyment, they were safe, every one else was out of danger, and Leon too was saved.

The night I arrived in Leon, having finished dinner, I left the hotel and taking the first turn haphazard wandered up the street. The electric lights were soon behind me and I found myself in what seemed to be a huge deserted square. The dark night was lit by milliards of twinkling stars, and gazing upwards at them my eye followed the line of what appeared to be immensely tall poplar trees. I looked again, I had never seen trees that colour, then it slowly dawned on me that I was in front of the great Cathedral. Slowly, slowly as my eye became accustomed to the dark I made out tapering spires that met the very stars themselves embedded in the purple-blue sky, an infinitude of pinnacles, with a wonderful building beneath. The mystery of a beautiful night conjures up all that is best in this country. Squalor and dirt are hidden ; one's thoughts take flight and wander back to the Spain of old, the glorious Spain of bygone days. At moments like this I certainly would never have been surprised to hear the clatter of hoofs and see a band of knights with pennons flying and armour glinting appear suddenly in the semi-darkness.

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Well, the days of chivalry have gone but the romance of a starry night will never die.

The next morning I returned eager to discover what my impressions would unfold. Much to my delight I found the restoration of the Cathedral, which I knew was in progress, so far finished that not a single scaffold pole, nor any rubbish heaps of old stones were anywhere to be seen. Extremely well have the designs of Señor Don Juan Madrazo been carried out, and the Cathedral to-day stands a magnificent church and grand monument of Christianity.

Santa Maria de Regla is the third Cathedral which has existed in Leon. The site of the first is supposed to have been outside the city walls. The second was built where once stood the Palace of Ordoño II., and this had been raised on ground occupied by Roman baths.

The present edifice was founded in 1190 by Bishop Manrique de Lara, a scion of a great family which was always in revolt, but was not completed until the early part of the fourteenth century.

With Toledo and Burgos, Leon's Cathedral forms the group of three great churches that are distinctly French, and closely resemble Amiens and Rheims. It would be difficult to find another building the interior of which exceeded the colour elegance and grace of this airy structure.

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LEON. THE WEST PORCH OF THE CATHEDRAL

THE
CATHEDRAL
OF
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The west porch is the finest Gothic specimen of its kind which exists in Spain and recalls those of Notre Dame de Paris and the Cathedral at Chartres. Three archways are supported by cloistered columns to which are attached figures under beautiful canopies. The archivolt and tympanum are covered with sculpture representing the Reward of the Just and Unjust, the Nativity, Adoration, Flight in Egypt, and Massacre of the Innocents. All are extremely interesting, many of the figures being in contemporary costume. Two grand towers flank the west façade, of which the north is the older and some thirty feet less in height than its neighbour. Both are surmounted by spires, that of the south being an excellent example of open filigree work, rivalling those at Burgos and very much better than that of Oviedo.

Between these towers and above the porch is a pediment with spires and a glorious wheel window, underneath which is a row of windows that corresponds to the triforium. This portion is part of the late restoration.

The south porch also has three arches, which have been well renovated. The centre one alone has a door to admit into the interior, it is double and surrounded by figures in the archivolt with reliefs in the tympanum. On the centre column is

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a figure of San Froilan, at one time Bishop of Leon.

A beautiful balustrade follows the sky-line of the whole Cathedral. This is broken by many pinnacles, some of which are spiral, with others on the façades and finishing the supports of the flying buttresses, give the exterior a resemblance to a forest of small spires.

The interior is a marvel of beauty and lightness. The nave and aisles consist of six bays, no lateral chapels disfigure the latter with churrigueresque atrocities. The triforium runs round the whole Cathedral. So cleverly has the spacing here been arranged, that with the clerestory it makes one magnificent panel of gorgeous light. The windows of this, forty feet high, were at one time blocked up for safety. They now contain stained glass, and soar upwards to the vaulting of the roof. Every window in the Cathedral is coloured and the effect as the sun streams through can well be imagined.

No flamboyant *retablo* spoils the simplicity of the east end, the place of what might have been a jarring note amidst the Gothic work being taken by good paintings in flat gilded frames. It was Señor Madrazo's idea to remove the *coro* from the centre of the nave, and had this been done Santa Maria de Regla would have gained immensely.

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The carved stalls are good, and the *trascoro* sculptured in white marble, which age has toned, and picked out in gold, is decidedly a fine work.

Among the chapels in the apse that of La Nuestra Señora del Dado contains a miraculous Virgin and Child. Tradition tells that a gambler who had lost heavily threw his dice at her and smote her on the nose. This forthwith bled copiously, hence the miracle and the name of "Dado" or "die." Another chapel contains the tomb of a great benefactress of the Cathedral, the Condesa Sancha. An expectant nephew, seeing her property slowly dwindling in the cause of the Faith, put an end to his aunt, and thereby met his own death by being pulled asunder by horses to which he was tied.

However, the chapels are not very interesting, but the tombs in the Cathedral are. Of all these that of Ordoño II., behind the chancel, is certainly the finest. The king lies at full length with a herald at his head and a monk at his feet holding a scroll inscribed "aspice." He wears his crown and carries the royal emblems. This tomb was erected five hundred years after the king's death, and is guarded by a quaint iron grille.

The cloisters, entered from a door in the north transept, are a jumble of Gothic and Renaissance, with a Romanesque arcade and a good deal of

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plateresque work as well. Some of the earliest frescoes in Spain are fast disappearing from the walls. They illustrate events in the Life of Christ, and are in an early Italian style that places their origin in doubt. From the western spires to the angular exterior of the chevet, a good idea is obtained of the beauty of the Cathedral as one stands in these cloisters, and when they, too, are restored the great work begun in 1860 will be finished.

Next to the Cathedral, and perhaps in a way more interesting, is the convent of San Isidoro el Real. This, the Escorial of Leon and Castile, is a building which Soult's soldiers desecrated in a most abominable manner ; next to the lower or Roman portion of the city walls it is the most ancient building in Leon. The body of San Isidoro was brought hither in the reign of Ferdinand I. who obtained it from the Emir of Seville, and the present church was erected to receive it. This was in 1063, the original convent being a hundred years older. San Isidoro was declared by the Council of Toledo to be the Egregious Doctor of Spain, and in his capacity of titular saint fought with cross and sword at the battle of Baeza against the Moors.

The church is Romanesque and dark with a lofty clerestory but no triforium. The High Altar shares with that at Lugo in Galicia the privilege of having the host always *manifestado*.

LEON. SAN MARCOS

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In the Panteon, a small low chapel at the west end, lie buried the Kings and Queens and other royalties of Leon. The columns are very massive with heavy capitals ; the ceiling is adorned with early frescoes which happily escaped the depredations of the French, they are crude, but the colour adds to the impressiveness of this gloomy abode of the Dead. Representing scenes from the Lives of our Lord and His Apostles, with signs of the Zodiac and months of the year, they date from 1180. The whole convent is replete with mural paintings, and before Soult sacked it contained many extremely interesting and rare missals of the seventh and eighth centuries.

Unique is another convent, that of San Marcos, which stands on the river bank outside the city on the road to Astorga. Founded as a chapel in 1168 for the knights of Santiago, it was rebuilt in 1514-49 by Juan de Badajos, and is certainly his masterpiece. It would be difficult to find a façade of greater beauty than this marvel of plateresque work. The remarkable pink and golden colour of the stone, intensified against the background of a deep blue sky, the delicacy of the carving in which angels and cherubs, griffons and monsters intermingle with floral wreaths and branches of fruit in orderly confusion, the elegant pillars and pilasters, all so truly Spanish under the blazing sun,

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fascinated me immensely as time after time I returned to wonder and admire.

Here again I could conjure up the past, the romance of Spain's greatest Order ; well housed were those knights of old in their glorious Hospice, and now—the river still runs under the walls of what afterwards became a convent, its banks are lined with tall poplars, far away rise the mountains of the north in rugged outline just as they did of yore—and San Marcos? Alas ! half is a museum and the rest a barrack. A forlorn air pervades the place, the old garden wants tending, and despite the life of the military, I could not help sighing once again, as I have so often sighed in Spain —“ How are the mighty fallen ! ”