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GUSTAVO ADOLFO BÉCQUER

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Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer

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LEGENDS, TALES AND POEMS

BY

GUSTAVO ADOLFO BECQUER

EDITED

WITH INTRODUCTION, NOTES AND VOCABULARY

BY

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TO

MY MOTHER

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PREFACE

In preparing this collection of Becquer's legends, tales, and short poems, which is the only annotated edition of this author's works that has been published as yet for English-speaking students, the editor has aimed to give to our schools and colleges a book that may serve, not only as a reader for first or second year classes, but also as an introduction to Spanish literature, through the works of one of the most original and charming authors of the Spanish Romantic school.

Fondness for good literature should be stimulated from the very first, and the quaint tales and legends of old Spain contained in this edition, told, as they are, in a most fascinating style, are well adapted to captivate the student's interest and to lead him to investigate further the rich mine of Spanish literature. Becquer's poetry is no less pleasing than his prose, and not much more difficult to read. With the aid of the ample treatise on Spanish versification contained in the introduction, the student will be enabled to appreciate the harmony and rhythm of Becquer's verse, and in all subsequent reading of Spanish poetry he will find this treatise a convenient and valuable work of reference.

The Life of Becquer, though concise, is perhaps the most complete that has yet been published, for it embodies all the data given by previous biographers and a certain number of facts gathered by the writer at the time of his last visit to Spain (in 1905-1906), from

friends of Becquer who were then living.

The vocabulary has been made sufficiently complete to free the notes from that too frequent translation of words or phrases which often encumbers them.

The notes have been printed in the only convenient place for them, at the bottom of each page, and will be found to be as complete and definite as possible on geographical, biographical, historical, or other points that may not be familiar to the student or the teacher. All grammatical or syntactical matter, unless of a difficult or peculiar character, has been omitted, while the literary citations that abound will, it is hoped, stimulate the student to do further reading and to make literary comparisons of his own.

It remains for the editor to express his profound gratitude to the following gentlemen for their aid in collecting facts regarding Becquer and for their encouragement of this work: the Exc^{mo} Sr. Conde de las Navas, the Exc^{mo} Sr. Licenciado D. Jose Gestoso y Perez, and the Exc^{mo} Sr. D. Francisco de Laiglesia. It is his pleasure also to convey his thanks to Professor George L. Burr of Cornell University for aid in certain of the historical notes, and most especially to gratefully acknowledge his indebtedness to the aid, or rather collaboration, of Mr. Arthur Gordon of Cornell University, and Mr. W. R. Price of the High School of Commerce, New York City.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
  LIFE OF BECQUER
  UNPUBLISHED LETTER OF BECQUER
  BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
  SPANISH PROSODY
DESDE MI CELDA--CARTA SEXTA
LOS OJOS VERDES
LA CORZA BLANCA
LA AJORCA DEL ORO
EL CRISTO DE LA CALAVERA
EL BESO
MAESE PÉREZ EL ORGANISTA
LA CRUZ DEL DIABLO
CREED EN DROS
LAS HOJAS SECAS
RIMAS
VOCABULARY

INTRODUCTION

LIFE OF BECQUER

"In Seville, along the Guadalquivir, and close to the bank that leads to the convent of San Jerónimo, may be found a kind of lagoon, which fertilizes a miniature valley formed by the natural slope of the bank, at that point very high and steep. Two or three leafy white poplars,

intertwining their branches, protect the spot from the rays of the sun, which rarely succeeds in slipping through them. Their leaves produce a soft and pleasing murmur as the wind stirs them and causes them to appear now silver, now green, according to the point from which it blows. A willow bathes its roots in the current of the stream, toward which it leans as though bowed by an invisible weight, and all about are multitudes of reeds and yellow lilies, such as grow spontaneously at the edges of springs and streams.

"When I was a boy of fourteen or fifteen, and my soul was overflowing with numberless longings, with pure thoughts and with that infinite hope that is the most precious jewel of youth, when I deemed myself a poet, when my imagination was full of those pleasing tales of the classic world, and Rioja in his _silvas_ to the flowers, Herrera in his tender elegies, and all my Seville singers, the Penates of my special literature, spoke to me continually of the majestic Bétis, the river of nymphs, naiads, and poets, which, crowned with belfries and laurels, flows to the sea from a crystal amphora, how often, absorbed in the contemplation of my childish dreams, I would go and sit upon its bank, and there, where the poplars protected me with their shadow, would give rein to my fancies, and conjure up one of those impossible dreams in which the very skeleton of death appeared before my eyes in splendid, fascinating garb! I used to dream then of a happy, independent life, like that of the bird, which is born to sing, and receives its food from God. I used to dream of that tranquil life of the poet, which glows with a soft light from generation to generation. I used to dream that the city that saw my birth would one day swell with pride at my name, adding it to the brilliant list of her illustrious sons, and, when death should put an end

to my existence, that they would lay me down to dream the golden dream of immortality on the banks of the Bétis, whose praises I should have sung in splendid odes, and in that very spot where I used to go so often to hear the sweet murmur of its waves. A white stone with a cross and my name should be my only monument.

"The white poplars, swaying night and day above my grave, should seem to utter prayers for my soul in the rustling of their green and silver leaves. In them the birds should come and nest, that they might sing at dawn a joyous hymn to the resurrection of the spirit to regions more serene. The willow, covering the spot with floating shadows, should lend to it its own vague sadness, as it bent and shed about its soft, wan leaves, as if to protect and to caress my mortal spoils. The river, too, which in flood tide might almost come and kiss the border of the slab o'ergrown with reeds, should lull my sleep with pleasant music. And when some time had passed, and patches of moss had begun to spread over the stone, a dense growth of wild morning-glories, of those blue morning-glories with a disk of carmine in the center, which I loved so much, should grow up by its side, twining through its crevices and clothing it with their broad transparent leaves, which, by I know not what mystery, have the form of hearts. Golden insects with wings of light, whose buzzing lulls to sleep on heated afternoons, should come and hover round their chalices, and one would be obliged to draw aside the leafy curtain to read my name, now blurred by time and moisture. But why should my name be read? Who would not know that I was sleeping there?"[1]

[Footnote 1: _Obras de Gustavo A. Becquer_, Madrid, 1898, vol. II, pp. 242-245. This edition will be understood hereafter in all

references to the works of Becquer.]

So mused the poet Becquer[1] in the golden days of his youth, when his veins were swelling with health, when his heart was fired with ambition, and in his ears was ringing the joyous invitation of his muse.

[Footnote 1: The name is spelled indifferently with or without accent--_Bécquer_ or _Becquer_. In the choice of the latter spelling, the authority of his principal biographer, Ramón Rodriguez Correa, has been followed.]

His knowledge of the world was confined to the enchanting city of his birth. Her gems of art and architecture had wrought themselves into the fabric of his dreams; he had mused in her palm-gardens, worshiped in her temples, and dreamed long afternoons on the shores of her historic river. He knew nothing of the cold, prosaic world of selfish interests. The time had not yet come when, in bitterness of spirit, and wrapping his mantle about him against the chill wind of indifference, he should say: "To-day my sole ambition is to be a supernumerary in the vast human comedy, and when my silent role is ended, to withdraw behind the scenes, neither hissed nor applauded, making my exit unnoticed."[1]

[Footnote 1: _Obras_, vol. II, p. 251.]

Indeed, in those later days of trial and hardship, he would often look out wearily upon Madrid, the city of his adoption, the scene of his crushing struggle with necessity, as it lay outspread before his windows,--"dirty, black, and ugly as a fleshless skeleton, shivering under its immense shroud of snow,"[1] and in his mind he would conjure up the city of his youth, his ever cherished Seville, "with her

Giralda of lacework, mirrored in the trembling Guadalquivir, with her narrow and tortuous Moorish streets, in which one fancies still he hears the strange cracking sound of the walk of the Justiciary King; Seville, with her barred windows and her love-songs, her iron door-screens and her night watchmen, her altar-pieces and her stories, her brawls and her music, her tranquil nights and her fiery afternoons, her rosy dawns and her blue twilights; Seville, with all the traditions that twenty centuries have heaped upon her brow, with all the pomp and splendor of her southern nature."[2] No words of praise seemed too glowing for her ardent lover.

[Footnote 1: _Ibid_., vol. III, p. iii.]

[Footnote 2: _Obras_, vol. III, pp. 109-110.]

By some strange mystery, however, it had been decreed by fate that he should only meet with disappointment in every object of his love. The city of his birth was no exception to the rule: since Becquer's death it has made but little effort to requite his deep devotion or satisfy his youthful dreams. You may search "the bank of the Guadalquivir that leads to the ruined convent of San Jerónimo," you may spy among the silvery poplars or the willows growing there, you may thrust aside the reeds and yellow lilies or the tangled growth of morning-glories, but all in vain--no "white stone with a cross" appears. You may wander through the city's many churches, but no tomb to the illustrious poet will you find, no monument in any square. His body sleeps well-nigh forgotten in the cemetery of San Nicolás in Madrid.

If you will turn your steps, however, to the _barrio_ of Seville in which the celebrated D. Miguel de Mañara, the original type of _Juan

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