

## SPANISH BALLADS.



THE year 1588 stands in some sort of cousinship with 1888. According to figures, this blessed year should be the Tri-Centennial of something. The student of history may have lost remembrance of a big Naval Pic-nic that

got somewhat mixed up off the shores of England, but the 300th year old bigot has not forgotten that this surprise party from Spain "was sent back by the Almighty Himself," as a certain Boston divine stated some Sundays ago, when he called on all civilized men to sing unto God a hymn of praise apropos of the 300th anniversary of the defeat of the "Spanish Armada" — the theme, from a historical, philosophical and religious point of view will be treated, I presume, as it deserves before this year of grace has slipped off into '89.

Spanish topics being the fashion just now, and the undersigned being of a peaceful turn of mind, leaves the heavy guns to be fired by some one of a martial calibre. Still he fancies a little space can be granted him under the OWL'S wing for a peaceful theme purely literary you know. Slightly historical, perhaps, in fact a disconnected something, call it what you will.

In the reign of Don Juan II. of Castile and Arragon in the earlier half of the 15th century, Christopher Columbus had not yet crossed the Atlantic. The Indian Chief with his tribe of red men was unknown to the Spanish Hidalgo. The aristocratic court of Castile could not grasp the republican idea of the coming American nation, and yet side by side with the intensely aristocratic life of the Spanish courtier-world, calmly flowed the democratic life of the world of letters. In the stronghold of aristocracy democracy established itself. Don Juan himself was a poet whose rhymings were neither inferior nor superior to those of other members of the class of royal poets. But if Juan had not the gift of creation he had the equally rare one of appreciation. He presided with taste and discernment over the consistory of "gay science" held annually at Barcelona. Poetry was the fashion. Dignitaries of all ranks did not hesitate to use their pen

in the service of the gay and oft times frivolous *Canzon*, in some cases elevating its tone, in others adding only to its degeneracy. Literature was the link that bound the social classes together, it was the great annihilator of caste distinction. Bishops and state officials corresponded with a hotel servant and a harness maker, who were like their "betters" fired with the "divine spark" of poetry if not of genius. (It is cooling to know that other fires than *inquisitorial* burned in those Spanish breasts, that other dreams than of an "invincible Armada" visited Spanish bolsters.)

The stately hidalgo, stricken with the love of letters (as well as with the hatred of some northern connections), doffed his plumed hat with the lofty grace of a true Castilian when he met the learned Jew, his compeer if not his superior in literary pursuits — *Montorio*, the dealer in *old clothes*; for, in the 15th century, as in the 19th the descendants of Abraham, collectively and individually, nationally and religiously, politically and socially, were wholesale and retail sellers of old clothes, of worn-out and thread-bare ideas. This *Sartor Resartus* fashion of dealing with this trade, did not however, enter into the simple mind of Montorio. He placidly returned the nobleman's salutation, speculating at the same time how many reals the costly mantle thrown back from the noble's shoulders would fetch, if decorating his second-hand clothing establishment . . . and went his way rhyming and cheating still . . . The literary circle of Don Juan's court was not complete, however, till a groom, named Mandragon, had joined it, who found the transition from the stable to the ballad not a difficult one. Such then were the varied elements of Spanish society that formed the literary democracy. The next consideration is the theme that animated their writing and the form through which the theme embodied itself. This form was the almost (?) universal, the old and ever new one, of love and religion, although a few individuals attracted by the majesty of rhythm and the intrinsic worth of the popular Italian writers, Dante especially, occupied their quills in the translation and