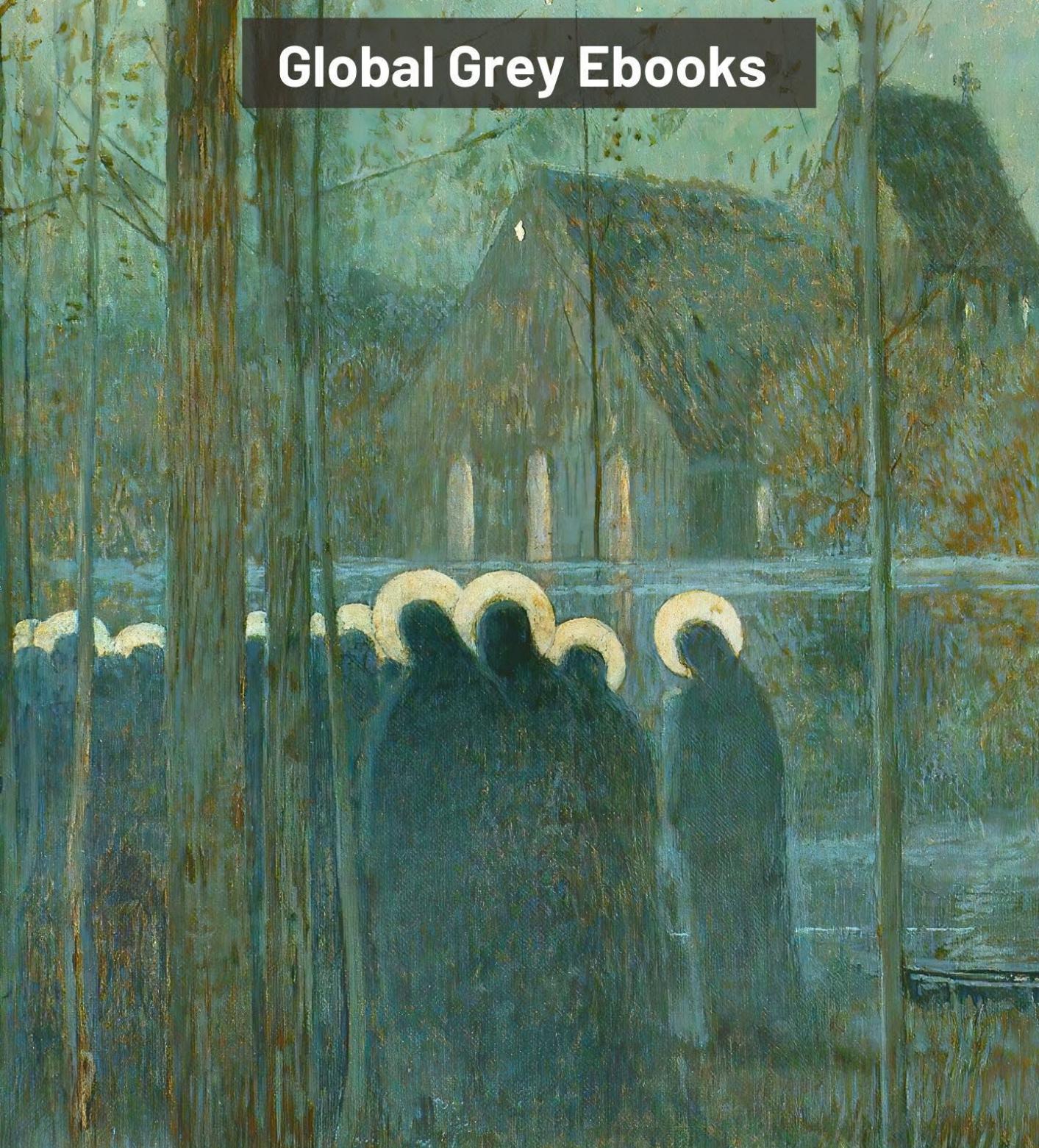


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LÀ-BAS

JORIS-KARL HUYSMANS



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Là-bas by Joris-Karl Huysmans.

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I

“You believe pretty thoroughly in these things, or you wouldn’t abandon the eternal triangle and the other stock subjects of the modern novelists to write the story of *Gilles de Rais*,” and after a silence Des Hermies added, “I do not object to the latrine; hospital; and workshop vocabulary of naturalism. For one thing, the subject matter requires some such diction. Again, Zola, in *L’Assommoir*, has shown that a heavy-handed artist can slap words together hit-or-miss and give an effect of tremendous power. I do not really care how the naturalists maltreat language, but I do strenuously object to the earthiness of their ideas. They have made our literature the incarnation of materialism—and they glorify the democracy of art!

“Say what you will, their theory is pitiful, and their tight little method squeezes all the life out of them. Filth and the flesh are their all in all. They deny wonder and reject the extra-sensual. I don’t believe they would know what you meant if you told them that artistic curiosity begins at the very point where the senses leave off.

“You shrug your shoulders, but tell me, how much has naturalism done to clear up life’s really troublesome mysteries? When an ulcer of the soul—or indeed the most benign little pimple—is to be probed, naturalism can do nothing. ‘Appetite and instinct’ seem to be its sole motivation and rut and brainstorm its chronic states. The field of naturalism is the region below the umbilicus. Oh, it’s a hernia clinic and it offers the soul a truss!

“I tell you, Durtal, it’s superficial quackery, and that isn’t all. This fetid naturalism eulogizes the atrocities of modern life and flatters our positively American ways. It ecstasizes over brute force and apotheosizes the cash register. With amazing humility it defers to the nauseating taste of the mob. It repudiates style, it rejects every ideal, every aspiration towards the supernatural and the beyond. It is so perfectly representative of bourgeois thought that it might be sired by Homais and dammed by Lisa, the butcher girl in *Ventre de Paris*.”

“Heavens, how you go after it!” said Durtal, somewhat piqued. He lighted his cigarette and went on, “I am as much revolted by materialism as you are, but that is no reason for denying the unforgettable services which naturalism has rendered.

“It has demolished the inhuman puppets of romanticism and rescued our literature from the clutches of booby idealists and sex-starved old maids. It has created visible and tangible human beings—after Balzac—and put them in accord with their surroundings. It has carried on the work, which romanticism began, of developing the language. Some of the naturalists have had the veritable gift of laughter, a very few have had the gift of tears, and, in spite of what you say, they have not all been carried away by an obsession for baseness.”

“Yes, they have. They are in love with the age, and that shows them up for what they are.”

“Do you mean to tell me Flaubert and the De Goncourts were in love with the age?”

“Of course not. But those men were artists, honest, seditious, and aloof, and I put them in a class by themselves. I will also grant that Zola is a master of backgrounds and masses and that his tricky handling of people is unequalled. Then, too, thank God, he has never followed out, in his novels, the theories enunciated in his magazine articles, adulating the intrusion of positivism upon art. But in the works of his best pupil, Rosny, the only talented novelist who is really imbued with the ideas of the master, naturalism has become a sickening jargon of chemist’s slang serving to display a layman’s erudition, which is about as profound as the scientific knowledge of a shop foreman. No, there is no getting around it. Everything this whole poverty-stricken school