

## **Christmas in Mexico and England**

Beatriz de Regil Muse

### **A Mexican Christmas**

A Mexican Christmas in those days differed from an English Christmas in that it was a social festival, whereas the English one was a family festival. I mean by this that the Mexican feast was celebrated by large groups of people who would agree to spend the nine days previous to Christmas together in a festival which combined the sacred with the profane in a very happy manner. This feast was called "Posadas" and commemorated the wanderings of St. Joseph and the Virgin in search of lodging on that memorable journey out of Galilee to Judea. Tradition said that for nine days they sought a home or tavern in which they might take shelter – and on the ninth night – tired and discouraged – they found the manger where our Savior was born.

I do not know whether the Posadas are of Spanish origin, but they have been for centuries the Mexican manner of celebrating the birth of Christ. The nine families who are to act as hosts having been chosen, the festival proceeds along traditional lines. Many friends of all ages are invited for this is a feast for young and old. In the evening the guests will assemble at the home where the Posada is to be held – sometimes in the garden if the house is so happily situated – or in one of the long corridors which surround the patio of most Latin American houses. A procession is formed – Lighted tapers are given to all and led by children clothed as angels the faithful go from room to room singing old carols. The angels are dressed in a quaint fashion for their flowing robes – also traditional – are copied from the clothes of angels in old Spanish paintings of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century. White robes are slit to the knee to show golden sandals which come up to just below the knee. Golden bands form a kind of breast plate – whilst white ostrich feathers sweep up from a wide coronet of gold.

The procession halts before a locked door and the leader, representing Joseph, knocks and begs admission for his wife who is [--] ill. Voices from the other side of the door refuse the admittance. Those outside again plead for shelter and St. Joseph says that he pleads in the name of the Queen of Heaven. At this the door is flung open and the triumphant procession sweeps into a brilliantly lighted room where stand more angels and children dressed as shepherds and where a beautiful crèche has been created. Then before the representation of the first holy night the guests kneel to pray. The candles are blown out and the rest of the evening is devoted to fun and laughter.

You are no doubt familiar with the plan of Spanish and Latin American houses. A forbidding mass of masonry broken by heavily barred windows. The view from the street will give no inkling of the charming scenes within. Once through the massive iron studded doorway you will find a patio gay with flowers and bubbling fountains and surrounded by wide corridors or cloisters with graceful arches. The rooms all face out to these corridors and they make a delightful setting for the feast which follows the religious ceremonies.

In the provincial towns where customs change slowly, one was still able to capture the peculiar charms of the Latin American social gathering. It was pleasant in that it included all generations and after the Posada the hosts had seen to it that there was something to please all the guests. For the elderly there were the armchairs and rockers in the corridor. In the large parlour, where a small orchestra would [--] away, the floor had been cleared for the young people to dance. Whilst stiff chairs ranged along the wall made a splendid vantage point for the chaperones. For the children there was a game, which is also essentially Mexican but is not confined solely to the Christmas season. I think it must be of Indian origin – as I have not found this custom in any other Latin American country but it is known all over Mexico. A large pottery crock is decorated to represent a flower, a figure, a locomotive, some political personage, anything you will. The crock is filled with sweets, cookies, and small toys and is then hung up on a long rope which runs over a pulley. This enables the crock to be shifted or lowered at will. The children are lined up, blindfolded and then given a long broom handle with which they must try to break the pot which dangles before them in a tantalizing manner. So near and yet so far! When the crock is broken, the children hurl themselves on the ground in a frantic effort to pick up the sweets and toys. Occasionally a crock full of ashes or flour is hung up as a surprise, but I do not think the children's mothers cared for this kind of joke, which wrought horror with freshly cleaned clothes and beautifully curled locks!

The pleasures of dancing and of the piñata having been exhausted the dining room doors would be thrown open and young and old would pour in to eat the food which was always delicious, tho it varied from province to province. Chocolate spiced with cinnamon and made in the traditional Aztec manner was a favorite drink, tho in some places the delicious [--] – a Spanish drink of milk and almonds was a favorite. “Todas compuestas” are eaten in the highlands. These are sandwiches of [--] rolls filled with delicious if peppery fillings of lettuce, avocado, tomato and chili...of different kinds of meats filling all liberally [--] with green peppers. But the honey cookies and sweetmeats were the main feature. Marzipan and coconut paste cut into fancy shapes and coloured brightly and tiny rolls of mashed sweet potatoes and almond wrapped in gaudy tissue paper, meringues – all sweets of [--] Spanish lineage.

I have described to you something I know of only from hearsay for I was never allowed to go to these Posadas given by our friends as my Mother did not like the late hours.

But from [-----] forward to the Christmas market where the Indians would come from many miles around bringing with them the exquisite toys and trinkets which were to fill the piñatas. For months they had toiled on these little masterpieces of the potter and basketweaver's art. Everything we used for daily life in Mexico was reproduced in miniature for the delight of the children. The market place was a veritable fairyland for the weeks before Christmas.

We were fortunate to live in a very poor parish. Our church was very simple – of massive Spanish colonial architecture and painted a most delicate [--]. It stood high

above the street in a walled garden and was a delight to the eye. I suppose the other parishioners – Indians and poor halfbreeds never [---]

Here on Christmas Eve we would gather for the midnight mass – a handful of the well to do – the mestizos, the men in [---] clothes, their black veiled women folk in crisp and highly coloured cottons - and the Indians who had come from great distances up the mountain slopes covered with coffee [---] from the [---] valleys where [---] or [---] the mountains from the pine clad slopes leading to the great central plateau. It was a festival of the humble. We had walked through the fragrant night thro gardens [---] with poinsettias and roses and the lily like [---]. The church was blazing with candles. The high altar was hung with Spanish moss [---][---][---] which had borne strange and glittering fruit - tinsel balls.

Mary and Joseph waited patiently for the coming of their child and in among the moss the native people had placed everything they could find that pleased their eye or fancy. The ox and the ass were there [---] [---] [---] the Mexican [---] [---], [---] [---] sheep. A long train crept up the steep incline. Yet one did not smile at these anachronisms. Christmas is after all a state of mind – a miracle which has come every year for nineteen hundred years and is old yet [---] [---] and vital – so why not clothe it with the trappings and symbols of our own day an age?

My part in the pageant of Christmas was before the Mass - to carry the statue of the infant Jesus in the procession around the church. I was surrounded by dark and [---] faces lighted only by the flickering candlelight. These humble people pressed around me and in my arms they saw not the exquisite Spanish statue, an artists conception of the Son of God, but [---] [---] [---] [---] [---] [---] the Christ who came to Earth centuries ago. At the altar they pressed up against me bringing gifts as the shepherds and the magi did of old. Pitiful little gifts - copper coins, silver from the more affluent, hens, flowers, [---], and gift of gifts, one little Indian boy dressed as a shepherd brought a [---] puppy.

But [---] was passing. The Christ child was safely [---] in the moss near his mother. The [---] organ struck up the [---] and least spiritual of music – the children blew on whistles and the church bells rang out. A more wholehearted welcome to Christmas could not be wished.

I have been in many places for Christmas among many people but never have I come so near as in that little church to that spirit of wonder and faith of [---] which must have been felt by the shepherds on the first Christmas night.

For me the word Christmas brings up memories both sweet and heart breaking but whenever I may be sometime [---].....

### **An English Christmas**

So that Christmas still had an intimate quality which has since been lost. Package wrapping was little known and was I think regarded with suspicion. String and brown

paper was good enough. The midday meal was such that the family was left speechless for the afternoon. Turkey sausage – plum pudding, nuts, fruit, chocolates and in nearly every household of the heart of a great empire the toast to absent friends was drunk at the close of the meal.

A long walk was almost essential after such a gargantuan meal and in the late afternoon after some hours in the brisk air the family would gather around the fire for the ancient game of [--]. This consists of pulling out of a deep dish large raisins which have been sprinkled with brandy and set alight. It is both pretty and exciting – the delicious taste of the raisins compensated for the burnt fingers.

Elaborate children's parties were given during the holidays. Chiefly by bachelor uncles or maiden aunts who had no twinges of conscience as they set before their nephews and nieces rich cakes, jellies, trifles, paper thin bread and butter, and jams of every kind. After the plain fare of the schoolroom these feasts were delicious beyond description. We [--] about them for weeks.

Lucky children went to the Pantomime, that curious mixture of fairy tale, burlesque, musical comedy, and political satire which blossoms every year at Christmas time to the huge delight of English children.

Festivities come to an end on Twelfth Night, when sadly we took down the decorations and bit by bit we saw holly and mistletoe [--] consumed in a glorious fire and another Christmas pass away. In some [--] a Twelfth Night cake was eaten and whoever found the bean which had been baked in the cake was crowned king of the revels.

As you see all the festivities were planned for the children and I expect the grown up people derived their Christmas joy from watching our joy.

The war brought a subtle change. Lonely outsiders, wounded soldiers were invited in to share the family party. [--] problems made home preparations more and more laborious so people started to buy things in the shops and very gradually Christmas became more commercialized. In later years I have noticed more people go to hotels and subscription dinners and dances and the festival no longer centered round the home and the children.