

The weeks before Christmas were such full and exciting ones. The excitement began with Father's cheque to Dr. Barnardo's homes, where he kept a cot. It took two weeks, at least, for a letter to reach England so this had to be done in plenty of time. At the same time a gift was made to the "Asilo" - the orphanage near our house. I believe it was largely run by Doña Carmen Rubio de Diaz, the President's wife.

Then we started on our own affairs. The plum-pudding was made and everyone in the house had to stir it. Then it was hung up in cheese-cloth in the pantry, all ready to be steamed on The Day. Mother and Fraulein then started on mince-meat, Christmas cakes and cookies, curing hams and so on. The whole house was full of delicious smells. The turkeys had been fattening in the back garden. I don't know how they managed to be so tender and delicious, because we used to chase them. I remember one very bad-tempered one called Kuropatkin who used to chase us instead. He finally had to have a pen made for him.

Next we went to the "puestos". These were stalls put up all around the outside of the Alameda, where they sold all the figures for the mangers <sup>that in Mexico still</sup> everyone put up. Mostly they were made of clay. There were the Holy Family, shepherds, angels, kings, animals and birds. Our manger was always a lovely one, but the clay figures often got broken, although they were carefully put away after Twelfth Night for the next Christmas. The "puestos" were gay with "piñatas", sweets, peanuts, fruits and everything to fill them with. Christmas trees, ornaments, moss. By the time we had bought all we wanted we hardly fitted in the carriage and everyone was sitting on each other's knees, carefully holding parcels, my brothers on the box with a large "piñata".

On the sixteenth of December the "Posadas" began. They commemorate the nine days of Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem. Every evening the whole household would line up in procession, holding lighted candles, and singing a litany, would walk around the house. The party who were giving the "Posada" then stood inside the house with the door closed. They impersonated the inn-keepers, while outside the others remained holding the figures of Joseph and Mary, and singing asked to be admitted. The party in the inn sang that there was no room, but finally, hearing who the pilgrims were, opened the door and there was rejoicing. The Inn-keeper would then pass around cakes and "atole" (a sweet, thin gruel), and favours with sweets. Or a "piñata" would be broken. The "piñata" is an

earthenware jar decorated with paper in gay colours. Sometimes they are very large and elaborate, in the shape of <sup>in</sup> animals, <sup>a</sup> birds, <sup>a</sup> stars, etc.. Each member of the party is ~~then~~ in turn blindfolded and given a stick with which to try to break the jar. Someone moves it up and down, making it very hard to hit, even without being blindfolded. When it finally breaks the children rush in and grab the sweets and fruit which fall out. Usually some very aggressive child falls flat on the sweets and refuses to let anyone else take any. The shy children pick up anything on the outskirts, and the fighters try to push the boy off and get some of the spoils he is lying on. Bartola always told us that if we did such a thing Mother would hear about it as soon as we got home. She was also afraid that a piece of the broken jar would fall on our heads.

Often we were invited to "posadas" in friends' houses and some of them were very beautifully done, with the children in costume and a real donkey for Mary to ride. Sometimes the "posada" was followed by a party, but the religious significance was never left out as it often is in these days when a "posada" means just a party or a dance.

On Christmas Eve the last "posada" took place and then the baby was laid in the manger. The songs that accompanied this act were very simple and lovely. We sang our own carols as well.

We were not allowed in the drawing-room for over a week before this. Mother and Fraulein, and Father in the evenings, were all very busy carrying parcels in, and decorating an enormous tree. Mother never did anything by halves, and our trees reached the ceiling of the room. The manger around the base of the tree was a work of art: little villages on the side of a hill, shepherds with their flocks, little lakes made of glass with ducks swimming on them, trees and roads with little figures on them.

After the last "posada" we waited in our party dresses while Mother and Father lit the candles on the tree, and it seemed ages went by before the door opened and we all trooped in. After the Child was laid in the manger, the giving of presents began. We had all been busy making the usual shaving-balls, and dust-collecting gifts that children always make for their parents. One year we really were pleased with ourselves. Every afternoon Fraulein taught my sister and me to embroider and sew for half an hour. Father had given us a big piece of linen from the "Liners" <sup>(this linen mill)</sup> and we had embroidered a table-cloth for Mother. It must

have taken us a couple of months and didn't look very good to me. However, once Fraulein had washed and ironed it, we hardly recognized it.

For each servant there was a basket of fruit, sweets and a dress length, and a new "reboso", as well as money in an envelope.

For us there were all the presents from Grandmother, aunts and uncles, of which we had a great many. However, there was still Santa Claus to wait for, and like all children down the ages we were sent off to bed with the warning that he would not stop at our house if we were awake when he came.

One Christmas, when I was about nine, <sup>my sister</sup> Madys and I decided we would stay awake and see him. So we played possum and saw Father come in with a large doll under each arm, which he placed at the foot of the bed. It is difficult to describe my feelings. Not that I minded the discovery about there not being a Santa Claus, but I felt mean at having caught my Father, whom I adored.

Of course, we all went to Church for the Christmas Service, and the climax of it all was the big Christmas dinner which Mother and Fraulein proudly produced. The table almost filled the room, and every available chair was brought in, as there were always a lot of guests, mostly friends of Father's and Mother's who were away from home.

In Mexico children used to receive their gifts from the Three Kings, on Twelfth Night, although to-day Christmas is also observed. There was some feeble idea brought out after the Revolution to supplant Santa Claus by something more nationalistic. I think the Old Man has endeared himself too much over the centuries, and it would have been impossible to fill his place.

The day after Twelfth Night, everything was carefully packed away for the next year and stored on the top shelves in the pantry. Mother would also put away some of the toys we received, feeling that we had too many. When we finally moved from that house several boxes were discovered, tucked away, which had been forgotten, and the toys in them were like new. We had even forgotten to whom they belonged.

There were also parties given at friends' houses, and one of Mother's Aunts always gave a big one for all the cousins and friends. I dreaded these, because, as we took dancing lessons, we were always asked to dance. My Brother would cheerfully dance a horn-pipe, and my Sister did not seem to mind at all. But I would have gladly died, ~~for the duration~~. One of my Mother's Cousins, a very pretty girl,

played the piano for us. She could play a horn-pipe and an Irish jig, but apart from the "The Mosquito's Wedding" did for everything, whether it was a cake-walk or anything else. Sometimes one did not quite know what one was dancing. We were probably 'cute' - I don't know. My Sister was d dainty little thing. But I sometimes wonder what our contemporaries thought of us. They all went to the same dancing school, but they flatly refused to be pried onto the floor.

After all was over, Fraulein appeared, the day after Christmas, with the castor-oil. She did not believe in taking any chances. It always ended this way, so we felt we might just as well tuck away all the mince-pies, meringues and sweets we could.