

Memories of Childhood in Mexico - Bartola

Childhood memories would not be complete without those of Bartola, the "Nana". She came to help Mother when Bobs, my third Brother was born, and he was always her favourite. If any one of us were ill, or had to be punished, she was genuinely upset, but if it was her "Willicito", as she called him, she suffered agonies.

She had been with one of the old Mexican families before she came to us, and of course we always heard how good they all were. We always stood in awe of these paragons, and felt shy when we met them, but we liked to hear stories about them.

Our manners were of great importance to her, and for all her gentleness and kindness she stood quite firm on all matters of this kind, and our behaviour was duly reported to Mother if she had taken us to a party on on some visit.

All the aunts and uncles were "Aunties" to her, and she insisted that "Aunty John" or "Aunty Willy" were shaken by the hand, looked right in the face, and spoken to politely. There was no getting out of it.

All her money was sent home to the village where her family lived, to support a blind nephew. My Mother appreciated her worth and dressed her and took care of all her wants, so she needed little for herself. She wore starched skirts, and blouses with a collar and long sleeves, and a clean white apron, but on Sundays, and when she took us to a party, this apron disappeared, and she was quite splendid in a blue merino dress with a little white frill around the collar and a black silk shawl instead of her usual "rebozo".

Bartola had long, shiny, jet-black braids coiled around her head, and when she washed her hair it fell around her like a tent, way below her waist. She came with us to England three times. On one of our trips, when she had washed her hair she let it down to dry while she watched my brothers on the beach. She was quite unconscious at first of the stir she was causing, but when people passed and openly admired her hair she sat on with great dignity, but obviously very pleased, because after that she just let it down while she sat watching the children, and it never failed to draw admirers who always decided she was an Indian "Ayah".

I look back in wonder at her patience when we were ill. She never left Mother until we were well again, except to make a trip to the shrine of Guadalupe. I wonder how many prayers she said for us, or how many charms she pinned on Our Lady's dress for

us. She would sit by the bed and tell us stories, or rock and sing the little ones to sleep. There is a pretty Mexican lullaby in which Our Lady asks why the baby cries. She is told he is crying for an apple he has lost, and she answers, "If he cries for one, I will give him two," then, "If he cries for two, I will give him three, Let them go for the apples to . . ." naming a place rhyming with the number. By the time she had reached ten apples the child was usually asleep and Bartola herself was nodding.

She learned quite a bit of English on her trips to England, and could order breakfast, or hot water,- she would have learned more had she not had us children to translate for her. One occasion comes to my mind when Mother and Father had gone to Paris and left us at the seaside with Bartola and an English Governess. The Governess was very strict and Bartola did not seem to mind us older children being disciplined. But one day Bobs refused to go to bed. Bartola came into the room with his milk just in time to see Miss Wheeler spank him. Well! We all held our breath as she grabbed my little Brother and told Miss Wheeler exactly what she thought of it all in a flood of Spanish. Although she understood never a word, the poor Governess was quite frightened, and she resigned as soon as Mother got back.

The second time Bartola went with us to England, my Mother took along several jars of "c/hiles" for her, as she found the English cooking very tasteless. When we were packing to return home, there was nearly a whole jar left and Mother suggested that as we would so soon be back here we might just as well leave it behind. But Bartola felt it would be so nice to have on board ship where the food needed even more livening-up. It was one of those last minute decisions, and she pushed the jar between the steamer rugs which Father had already strapped up. We arrived at Waterloo safely, and an energetic porter swung the rugs out of the carriage. The jar flew out onto the platform and smashed, causing considerable commotion. My older brothers walked off, hoping not to be taken for part of this set-up. And there was Father, among several on-lookers who were trying not to look interested, explaining to the porter what it all was, and Mother trying to console Bartola, who was about in tears at the prospect of two weeks with nothing more interesting than Worcestershire Sauce to cheer the palate.

She was convinced that she had seen and spoken to the Pope, but as we had never been to Italy it could not have been. I think sometime when we touched in a Spanish port and my Mother took her to hear Mass, one of the priests must have spoken kindly to her. My Mother was always happy when she could get someone to speak in Spanish to her, and must have contrived this meeting.

One thing about Bartola which did not seem to fit in with the rest of her ways was the manner in which she dusted. She would take the duster and whack away at the furniture in a way that was good to watch. Why she never broke things was a wonder, and almost disappointing.

Bartola was with us over ten years and went back to her first employers when we went to school. She must be over a hundred years old as I write this, and she lives there to-day, doing light things like taking care of the birds, talking to them all the time. It seems there was a cock in the yard which she used to feed, and when the cook one day said in a loud voice that he was ready to be cooked, Bartola motioned her to be quiet. "Hush!" she said. "Not before him, poor thing. He might hear you."