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Christmas in Mexico

CHRISTMAS in Canada and the United States means for the girls and boys the coming of Santa Claus, the hanging up of stockings, the Christmas tree with its candles and pop corn and bright array of gifts, skating, sleighing and tobogganing for those who are so fortunate as to live far enough north.

Christmas is celebrated in a very different way in Mexico, the next door neighbor to the United States on the South. Would you like to go with me to spend the Christmas season in Mexico? Then we must start some days before the middle of December, for the festivities there are long continued, starting nine days before Christmas—the twenty-fifth of December, as you all know, and lasting until the Feast of the Epiphany on the sixth of January; and this entire time is one long delightful jubilee.

If, instead of a tedious railway journey, we had a magic lamp and could simply close our eyes, and upon opening them find upon opening them a country of ice and snow and open them in a land of white sunshine, of skies as blue as those of Italy, a summer land of lovely flowers. Only on the low lofty volcanic peaks is snow ever seen, and not even the most daring of you would dream of tobogganing there.

Instead of shoppers hurrying to and fro, muffled in warm clothing and furs, we would find canals crowded with power-laden boats and market plazas thronged with gaily-dressed natives. Flowers are so cheap that even the most humble home can afford sprays of the beautiful Christmas plant, Noche Buena.

As there are no chimneys, the children do not try to stay awake on Christmas Eve to see Santa Claus descend with his pack. Only in the homes of American residents do the children hang up stockings. Among the Mexicans the custom is unknown.

The celebrations which begin on December sixteenth and continue until the twenty-fifth, are called Posadas. The word in Spanish means an "inn," or abiding place. While the celebration was originally religious, it is now only partly religious and has become a very gay and sociable occasion. The Posadas are limited to the cities, but in those places the poorest as well as the richest families hold them.

The origin of the Posada is in the gospel story of the birth of Jesus. Caesar issued a decree that all the world should be taxed, so Mary and Joseph went up to Jerusalem to be enrolled. Mary made the journey on an ass which Joseph led. Each night of the journey is supposed to have taken them to ask for shelter which was often refused. On the last day, arriving at Bethlehem, they found the city full of people and no place either in private house or inn for them to rest. At last they took shelter in a stable and there the Christ was born.

In order to celebrate this journey fully, the Posadas begin with the journey at Nazareth. Each year a house is chosen in a family circle or among a group of friends, and at the house for nine consecutive nights, the festival is held. Or, sometimes, the celebration will be held at different houses during that time.

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is represented by the first part of the celebration. At the appointed hour, the guests assemble at the house which has been chosen for the celebration and each person present is furnished with a lighted candle, and two and two, they march around the halls and through the corridors several times chanting the solemn "Litany of Loretto." As each invocation is ended the audience chants "ora pro nobis" (pray for us). At the head of the procession the figures of Joseph and Mary, made of clay or wax, dressed in gay colored satins, are borne, either in the hands, or lying in a basket. Sometimes these figures are dressed in brilliant costumes of lace with tinselled borderings. At each door the procession pauses and knocks and begs admittance, but no answer or invitation to enter is given.

At last, however, the door is opened and all go in and Joseph and Mary have secured shelter for the night. The pilgrims are placed on an altar and some prayers recited, though these are generally hurried through in the quickest manner possible.

Frequently on the last night a stable is arranged in a room or on the roof where Joseph and Mary are placed with utmost reverence. On this night, a figure of the infant Jesus is also carried. After the litany, the party proceed to have a general good time, which is kept up until a late hour. Everywhere, throughout the city is heard the litany sung by processions winding in and out of rooms and around improvised shrines. The patios are hung with lights, and fireworks blaze skyward in every direction.

The piñate takes the place of the Christmas tree. It is an oval shaped, earthen jar, handsomely decorated with tinsel and streams of tissue paper, made up to represent clowns, ballet girls, monkeys, roosters, various grotesque animals and even children almost life-sized. The jars are crammed full of sweets, rattles, whistles and crackers. The breaking of the piñate follows the litany and is an exciting event which generally occurs in the patio. It is suspended from the ceiling and then each person desiring to take part is blind-

folded in turn, and armed with a pole, proceeds to strike the swinging piñate. Three trials are permitted. Sometimes many are blind-folded before a successful blow brings the sweets and bon-bons rattling to the floor. Then there is a race and a scramble for the dainties. Thousands of these piñates are broken each Christmas season and the vendors perambulate the streets with a pole across the shoulders on which are suspended the grotesque figures. It is quite a common sight to see business men hurrying home carrying these strange-looking tissue paper trimmed figures.

These are the chief features of the Christmas celebrations in Mexico, so different from our own. A merry time, the girls and boys of Mexico have to be sure, but don't you think we will be quite willing to stay at home another year for a real holly and mistletoe Christmas with jingling bells and a frost-bound earth?



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