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CHRISTMAS IN SPAIN

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OVER the entire Christian world Christmas is a hallowed season. Every busy city and quiet hamlet, every nook and corner catches something of the spirit of Christmas and learns anew the old, old message: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will." Our Saviour's coming on that silent night two thousand years ago was to bring to mankind His message of peace and joy and love. Hence, in America, in Europe, under the scorching equator and in the icebound Arctic—wherever men gather—Christmas is loved by all. Perhaps many of those who in some fashion celebrate Christmas do not know the underlying significance of the season, though unconsciously they catch something of its spirit and are wafted by the gentle current of love into the great sea of joy and merriment which our Saviour's coming affords every sincere Catholic soul. But if one seeks the true Christmas spirit in all its fulness one must pass through the threshold of the holly-decked door to the fireside of the Christian family; for the Christian family is a replica of the Holy Family—of the pure Virgin Mother, the chaste spouse Joseph and the Divine Babe with His gifts of peace and joy and love to the world.

That is why Christmas is particularly the feast of the family and thoughts turn to home and the whole world speaks the universal language of love. Everywhere the spirit of the season is abroad and while the manner of celebrating Christmas differs according to nationality and temperament, yet the world feels akin and all are interested in knowing how others catch the Christmas spirit and interpret its message of love.

In Spain the season is the most cheerful period of the year. In a country so thoroughly Catholic it is natural that the celebration should center around the Church and her ceremonies; but the civic and the home customs enjoy no small portion of the season's merriment and entertainment.

Christmas Eve is the "home-coming" time for the scattered members of the family. The younger children back from school and college after an absence of three long months are eager to communicate to their folks the triumphs and defeats, the successes and misfortunes; the little every-day happenings of college life, commonplace enough in themselves, but which acquire great importance in the recital to the family circle; the older son, now a business man employed in some distant city, once more at the fireside of the old mansion with interesting stories about his first struggles with the world; the married daughter with her growing children and the baby who will coo its first greeting to the grandparents—all are happily gathered in the old homestead; for Christmas is the feast of the family and the season for paying the traditional visit to the loved ones.

On Christmas eve the shades of night fold their dark mantle around the home. Outside it is dark and cold, but inside the big hearth crackles with its warm fire sending a rosy glow over the faces of the happy family gathered round it. In the window the bright lamp sends out its rays of light to guide the relatives and neighbors who will drop in to greet the family. Their presence has been requested for this evening's supper. The children are noisy and happy and every two minutes ask the housekeeper if supper is ready. She has been busy all the afternoon with her preparations and is about to submit her efforts for approval.

The antique clock hanging on the kitchen wall points to seven. No need of a signal tonight for supper. With one accord there is a spontaneous movement towards the dining room. Every one takes his appointed place. The head of the family, or if good fortune favors it, a relative priest presides and blesses the meal. On the table large enough for a dozen services the big fancy-shaped cake and the heaping dish of wine-boiled toast—the two traditional Christmas foods—occupy prominent places. When all are seated the one to whom the honor falls divides the cake and supper begins. All are joyful, except the housekeeper, who awaits with anxiety the verdict on her cooking. After a universal acclamation of approval the meal proceeds with the

housekeeper or her assistants serving. The delicacy of the food, the excellence of the service matters not. It is HOME. That is the important fact. Each and every one enjoys the most pleasant and happiest of times. An intimate chat is kept up during the supper. Those who came from afar have a chance to relate their experiences to an appreciative audience. Whether the telling is of joy or sorrow, of success or failure, they know that the recital will fall on willing ears, be received into loving hearts and shared in full measure by every one of the gathering. Thus the supper is lengthened well over an hour; but finally all arise and in a reverent attitude join the priest, or the family head, in the closing ceremony. In touching words he gives thanks to God for past favors, for the present happy gathering and asks His assistance for the future. Then with tender embraces for one another all exclaim: "Merry Christmas" and pledge their mutual help and cooperation. The children having eaten a little too much feel drowsy, but they rub their fists into drooping eyelids and reject the thought of bed since they look forward with great pleasure to assisting at the traditional Midnight Mass.

The group gathers once more around the fireside, but soon the church bells chime the summons to Midnight Mass. It is a welcome prospect for everybody and is the central and most important ceremony of the day. Most of them have purified their souls with the Holy Sacrament of Penance the preceding afternoon and are going to receive into their hearts the Child-Jesus in the very hour of His temporal birth. Some of them may delay it until a later Mass, but few will neglect it beyond the New Year. Spanish churches, unlike the American ones, have no fixed pews, but portable chairs are used instead. The faithful occupy different parts of the church according to their rank; the children nearest to the sanctuary, the women in the body of the church and the grown men in the rear.

The Midnight Mass is the main feature of the Christmas celebrations. Not long ago in every church, and even now in some of them, the Mass is harmonized with castanets, timbrels, drums, flutes and other musical instruments. The music is frequently pastoral and thus easily accords with such instruments. Oftentimes the entire congregation knows how to sing the Mass, because they have heard it since childhood. After the Communion of the priest the people move towards the sanctuary to receive the Precious Body of the recently born King. During this

time a choir of female voices is singing motets of Christmas airs.

A Spanish church possesses a peculiar charm at Midnight Mass in the "Bethlehem" which occupies a prominent place in the sanctuary. On a large platform stands the grotto surrounded by snow-covered fields. Inside there is the manger with the Infant Babe. At either side of Him kneel the Virgin Mother and St. Joseph, and the kine may be seen warming the chilled limbs of the Child. Angels are seen flying in the air and singing heavenly melodies. The shepherds appear with lambs on their shoulders and other gifts for their Saviour. Some are dancing with joy; others just awakened by the call of the angel are encouraging one another to pass to Bethlehem to see the good tidings announced by the celestial messenger. The three Magi and their train come to offer their precious gifts to "The King of the Jews." It is a really vivid representation of the birth-place of Our Saviour. All the details which a fervent imagination is capable of reproducing are to be found in the Spanish Bethlehem.

Before leaving the church the faithful range themselves in two rows and pass before the Bethlehem to reverently kiss the feet of the Child Jesus which the priest presents. During this ceremony everybody is singing the "Adeste Fideles." It is something like the American custom of clustering around the Crib after Mass. Coming out of the church they meet their relatives and friends with the exchange of greetings and good wishes and all return home with happy hearts to eat the remnant of the Christmas cake before snatching a few hours rest.

The next morning the early risers hear no patter of childish footsteps on the stairs nor any exclamation of joy at the sight of the Christmas tree with its tinsel and candles and Santa Claus' load of toys and presents, for both Christmas tree and Santa Claus have no part in the Spanish children's celebration. There is something else dearer to the Spanish heart and more cherished by long custom, something that fits in with the central idea of the whole Christmas celebration. It is the "Home Bethlehem," or, at least, the manger with the Infant Jesus in it. As the American fathers and mothers decorate the tree on Christmas Eve, so do the Spanish parents arrange the Bethlehem.

It is a tender and profound devotion which the Spanish families profess towards the Infant Jesus. Every child knows from infancy the history of Our Lord's birth and it might be said that



In her pure bosom had been made
The First Communion, moons before;
She first received and first enshrined
The Flesh and Blood we all adore.



Cathedral of Toledo, Spain

they are brought up with some kind of acquaintance and familiarity with the Divine Infant. It is a very curious thing to watch how they prattle in the most intimate way with the Little Babe, share with Him their childish delights and sorrows, express to Him their little wishes and ask His blessings for their parents, brothers and sisters. For the children as well as for the rest of the family during this season, the Infant Jesus is the real Master of the House. Though in Spain there is not that enormous exchange of Christmas gifts that marks the celebration in America; yet the children are not forgotten and they can be sure of a new suit, toys and candy enough to satiate their childish wishes. Their godfathers and godmothers are supposed to remember their godchildren with a box of candy, a pair of shoes or some little gift.

It is eight o'clock in the morning. The church bells sound again and find the family once more gathered in the church for the late Masses. All go to hear the morning Masses. The last one is sung with almost the same ceremonies as that of Midnight.

Then come the late breakfast and the children's hour. This is the time when the outburst of delight and love of sport overflow the children's hearts. They are dressed in fancy and comic garb and leave the house to dance around the town singing Christmas airs. At the door of every family house they stop and the dance is prolonged for a few minutes. Then the house-keeper appears at the window or door and throws a handful of nuts or some dainty into the air and the boys scramble to snatch all they can. Oftentimes, when more venturesome, they go farther and visit the nearby towns. First they stop at the village church to see the Bethlehem and to sing one or two "billancicos" (Christmas airs) to the accompaniment of their castanets and timbrels. Then they go through the village stopping wherever convenient and promising and by singing and dancing attract the attention of the neighbors. Then they romp back home as happy and noisy as ever. Usually they are followed by a crowd of aged people who reflect the youthful spirit and recall their own childhood Christmas gambols.

There is no lull in the festivities during the afternoon for then come the sports and races that both young and old have been looking forward to for many days. The ordinary amusements of the year pale into insignificance beside the elaborate Christmas ones. At no other time are the bicycle, automobile

and horse races more thrilling. But the greatest of the sports to attract general attention through all Spain is the annual bull-fight. They are always numerous, but never quite the same as on Christmas day. The enthusiasm of the Spanish boys for the Christmas bull-fight might be compared to that of the American boy for a circus. Everybody, big and little, talks about it for many days before the event. The fighter must be one of the most famous in the country; the bull must be well-fed, wild and quick—the best one that has been seen on the bull-fight square. If in Spain anything is comparable to the great concurrence of American people to a baseball or football game it is that of the Christmas bull-fight.

Christmas night finds young and old on the streets for the dancing. Not the modern steps of the American dance hall to the music of a jazz orchestra, but the Spanish national steps accompanied by bagpipes and drums—the steps that have graced the Spanish dancing for generations. In this festivity the young dance with the old and all make merry. The enjoyment is varied by young men appearing in fancy garb equipped with sleigh and cow bells and dancing from crowd to crowd with a great clatter.

The day after Christmas is not "blue-Monday" in Spain, for the Christmas festivities continue almost unabated for two more days and do not close entirely until "Little Christmas," January 6th. The day following Christmas is the feast of St. Stephen Protomartyr and the next day the feast of St. John the Evangelist. These two Saints are the Patrons of many towns in Spain and have always been highly venerated by the Spanish people. On the morning of the 26th all eyes scan the morning papers for the announcement of the lucky numbers in the great national lottery drawn at Madrid on Christmas day. This is a source of hope for every Spaniard. Several months previous he purchased his tickets giving him chances on the first two great prizes of a million pesetas or more, as well as the lesser prizes ranging down the scale to a few centesimos. There are few who do not try their luck. Hence all the eyes scan the papers on the following morning for the lucky numbers. Of course the vast majority are disappointed, but hope springs eternal and plans are made for the next year when luck may smile on them.

The third day after Christmas is the Feast of the Holy Innocents. This day finds a new feature introduced into the Christ-

mas celebration, something that corresponds to the American "April Fool Day." One has to be alert for the usual jokes and tricks and he who falls is called an "Innocent."

Now we are in the Spanish Capital. It is the last night and the last hour of the old year. In the very center of the city, "La Puerta del Sol," there is a crowd of many thousands gathered. The buildings are brilliantly illuminated; the big clock, by which the time in Spain is regulated, strikes the first stroke of twelve. It is the tolling out of the Old and the ringing in of the New. The crowd turns anxiously towards the tower of a government building. A white sphere previously suspended on the tower is seen to fall. The multitude breaks out in a burst of shouting, whistling and noise. Everybody rejoices with their friends and then exchange greetings of the New Year. It is on a small scale the New Year celebration of the big American cities.

Now comes a respite in the varied activities until Little Christmas. This finds a semblance to the American custom of hanging stockings. The three Magi are supposed to travel this night through the country with boxes of candy for the children, so all the boys and girls put their empty boxes at the bedroom window. The chances are very favorable that the morning will find them filled. The Magi will not fail them.

The world is akin. The same emotions pulse through all our breasts at Christmas time. It has an universal appeal. The Spanish celebration may differ in many particulars from the traditional American way. But are they different? The same holy joy, the same spirit of love and service is there and the same thought messages are sent to the Child Jesus. No, they do not really differ after all. It is only the method of expression that marks them off one from another.

