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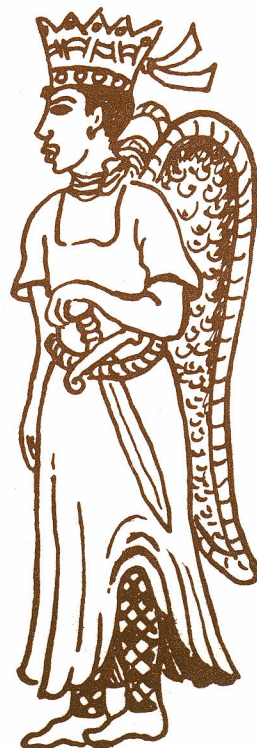
THE DEVIL ATTENDED CHURCH ON CHRISTMAS



Well, not really, he was just an actor in a religious drama, but the mere presence of the sham Prince of Darkness at the Presidio Chapel's celebration of the Nativity was enough to rivet the fascinated attention of the newly arrived Americans in 1846.

Los Pastores was the title of this play, a survival of a custom once common in medieval Europe. From the tenth to the fourteenth century the incidents surrounding the career of Jesus Christ, particularly those concerned with the Nativity and the Resurrection, were used by churchmen as the basis for dramatic pieces called Mystery or Passion Plays. They were excellent educational devices and most advantageous for the teaching of doctrines.

The churches themselves made splendid settings for these dramas. To one side of the high altar the manger could be set up, sometimes with live animals to lend a realistic note; Herod might have his throne on the other side, and in the center there remained a natural and appropriate stage for the whole Nativity Play. Here sang the Shepherds in adoration, here the Wise men pro-



ferred their gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Infant Jesus, and from that throne Herod shouted his orders for the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents while the harassed Holy Family fled into Egypt.

Into this serious religious spectacle there crept by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a counterbalance or farcial element. The Devil, he who tricks poor sinners but is ever worsted in his struggle against God, became a comic figure. His sly attempts to pluck men into perdition by tempting them to impiety, to lust, to avarice, to anger were vastly amusing to the crowd in the church. They knew that sooner or later, despite all his wiles, Satan would get his come-uppance, but until that happened it was fun to watch him try on his fellow actors the very lures he presented daily in their work-a-day lives.

As time went on, this tendency toward broad comedy and buffoonery steadily increased, and eventually it succeeded in getting the plays ejected from the churches and into the streets, and from these back into the theatres from whence, paradoxically, play-acting had been driven by the Church in the first place. However, although the church-centered religious drama lost ground rapidly in most of Europe after the middle of the sixteenth century, it did not entirely vanish, due to the hold it had in such conservative areas as Spain. Very naturally, the Spanish missionaries to the New World found these impersonations of Biblical events particularly effective in fortifying the unlearned people in their faith, and the chapel became the dramatic center of the Indian mission.

The mission fathers were the authors of the first Mystery or Miracle Plays in Mexico and in California. They composed the music for the chanted parts and taught their Indian charges how to accompany the songs with the sweet music of the harp, violin, guitar, flute, triangle and drum. The Devil and his dupes were not forgotten, but under the watchful eye of the Inquisition and the padres their roles in the dramas were strictly supervised. They were still objects of merriment, but inside the church proper, they confined their antics within respectable limits.

Walter Colton, in his *Three Years in California* has left us a sprightly account of the Nativity Play, *Los Pastores*, at the Presidio Chapel of Monterey during the Christmas Eve ceremonies of 1846. To this Congregationalist minister and naval chaplain, the capering of actors within the sacred portals of God's house must have been among the most novel scenes that he had ever witnessed. But Walter Colton was no narrow fanatic; he did not regard the performance as blasphemous, — had not King David danced before his Lord? Indeed, so deeply interested was the first American alcalde of Monterey in the curious customs and childlike simplicity of his legal parishioners that scarcely anything these Monterenos did shocked, irritated or threw him out of countenance. He was full of admiration for their good qualities and good-naturedly tolerant of their shortcomings.

"As soon as the sun had gone down, and twilight had spread its sable shadows over the hills and habitations of Monterey, the festivities of Christmas Eve commenced. The bells rang out a merry chime; the windows were filled with streaming light; bonfires on plain and steep sent up their pyramids of flame; and the sky-rocket burst high over all in showering fire. Children shouted; the young were filled with smiles and gladness; and the aged looked as if some dark cloud had been lifted from the world.

"While the bonfires still blazed high, the crowd moved towards the church; the ample nave was soon filled. Before the altar bent the Virgin Mother, in wonder and love, over her new-born babe; a company of shepherds entered in flowing robes, with high wands garnished with silken streamers, in which floated all the colors of the rainbow, and surmounted with coronals of flowers.

"In their wake followed a hermit, with his long white beard, tattered missal, and his sin-chastising lash. Near him figured a wild hunter, in the skins of the forest, bearing a huge truncheon, surmounted by an iron rim, from which hung in jingling chime fragments of all sonorous metals. Then came, last of all, the Evil One, with horned frontlet, disguised hoof, and robe of crimson flame. The shepherds were led on by the angel Gabriel, in purple wings and garments of light. They approached the manger, and kneeling, hymned their wonder and worship in a sweet chant, which was sustained by the rich tones of exulting harps.

"The hermit and hunter were not among them; they had been beguiled by the Tempter, and were lingering at a game of dice. The hermit seemed to suspect that all was not right,



The Royal Presidio Chapel of San Carlos de Borromeo de Monterey, the only surviving presidio chapel in California. It was founded in 1770 as a mission by Father Junipero Serra, but was converted into the Royal Presidio Chapel the next year when Father Serra shifted the mission to the Rio Carmelo. It has had several additions since its completion in 1795, but is essentially the same today as when Los Pastores performed here in 1846.

Courtesy Mrs. W. E. Kneass and Monterey Public Library

and read his missal vehemently in the pauses of the game; but the hunter was troubled by none of these scruples, staked his soul, and lost! Emboldened by his success, the Tempter shoved himself among the shepherds; but here he encountered Gabriel, who knew him of old. He quailed under the eye of that invincible angel, and fled his presence. The hermit and the hunter, once more disenthralled, paid their penitential homage. The shepherds departed, singing their hosannas, while the voices of the whole assembly rose in the choral strain."

By a fortunate stroke of research, the editors of these *Noticias* are now able to add, for the first time, certain details to this very scene from the diary of another onlooker. The diary's author, determined by us to be William Robert Garner, an Englishman of twenty-two years residence in California, merits a full description in a later issue, but for the present it is most interesting to note that in December, 1846, he was Alcalde Colton's secretary and interpreter and presumably accompanied him to the Nativity Play.

Captivated by Colton's habit of jotting down for publication the odd things that befell him, Garner, too, had begun the practice of writing a running commentary for the same purpose. However, his little essays on the peculiarities of California life never exactly parallel the entries in the alcalde's diary. They seem, rather, to be concerned with filling in the gaps in his employer's observations and knowledge. Where Colton speaks of the humorous features of his office and the historical events of the time, his secretary concerns himself with the economics of California, its natural resources, and the intimate customs of the people.

Colton's writing is easy, urbane, flowing; Garner's, although not lacking in a kind of Coltonesque wry humor, is factual and business-like. Since he was an educated man, spoke and wrote excellent Spanish, and probably understood much more of the background of the play than the spellbound Alcalde, his account of the customs and characters may be considered reliable.

"Monterey, California, December 29, 1846

It is the custom of this country to ring the church bells at midnight on Christmas Eve, for the purpose of waking up all those persons who wish to hear High Mass before daylight; it being customary to sing this mass about one or two o'clock on Christmas morning. The church is then illuminated outside and brilliantly lit up within, — as much perhaps for the purpose of being able to read the church service, as to see plainly the masquerade which takes place at the end of the Mass.

"This masquerade, or perhaps farce would be the better term, is intended to represent the adoration paid by the shepherds to our Saviour at his birth; but there has been introduced a certain "dramatis personae" which entirely destroys the effect the representation was originally intended to produce. The superfluous characters are the Devil, the hermit, a woman as shepherdess, old Bartholomew, and the Archangel Michael. These, with five shepherds, make up the actors; and these last are dressed in their common daily clothing, with a piece of printed calico drawn over each of their shoulders like cloaks, and a staff for a crook dressed up at the head with many various colored ribbons, lace, beads, &c.

"The boy who represents the angel is dressed in a sky-blue tunic, drawn up on the outside part of each side as high as the knee; short sleeves, and open at the breast; a paper crown set off with false pearls, gilt paper, and various ribbons of various colors curiously worked in; a pair of large wings are fixed to his shoulders, elegantly worked over with rich lace; between the wings and down the back a red scarf is hung, to give the light blue of the tunic a more striking appearance. On his feet he has a pair of red or blue satin shoes, and plaid silk socks halfway up the leg. This, with a small sword, completes the costume of the Archangel.

"Satan is dressed in black, with a red sash over the left shoulder and knotted under the right arm, with a large sword, a most terrific looking mask, and a cap of black feathers. The hermit is dressed in a friar's old cloak: he has a book and a bag in his hand, and wears a mask made of sheep skin, with the wool shaved off that part intended to represent the face. Old Bartholomew has likewise a sheep skin mask, is dressed as a poor wayfarer, with his budget at his back and a staff in his hand, with some old tin pots or rags made fast to the top of it, intended to form a contrast with the gaudy staves of the shepherds. For the full performance of this farce two more persons are indispensably necessary. These are, a fidler, and a person to play the guitar.

"Their first performance is always in the church, and consists of a Christmas carol spoken by the shepherds, or rather sung, at the same time striking continually on the floor with the lower ends of their staves, and thus in a measure drowning out their own voices. Satan, the hermit, and Bartholomew act their parts almost without interfering with the shepherds, having very little connection with them. Finally, the Archangel overcomes Satan whilst he is tempting Bartholomew and the hermit to sin, and after a few more verses are sung by the shepherds, the players leave the church."

In these two reports of the same event there are certain discrepancies, but they are not, except in one case, very important ones. Colton makes Bartolo or Bartholomew, a wild man from the woods; Garner has him a vagabond. In any case, Bartolo was a key clown and a juicy part for an actor. Jacinto Rodriguez of Monterey, later signer of the Constitution of 1849, was a famous figure in *Los Pastores*, playing either Bartolo or the Devil. The small boys of the town hid and watched him round-eyed as, days before the enactment, he used to stride up and down the sandy beaches of Monterey practicing his fearful shouts and mad gestures. Mrs. Mike Noon, aged about ninety when interviewed in 1944 by Mary Greene, then Curator of the Old Custom House, remembered that as a small child in Monterey there were wonderful Christmas celebrations, but the only actual figure of the play that stuck in her mind was "a very lazy man who didn't want to do anything but sleep, and when the shepherds came to him and said, "Get up, Bartolo. Come and see la Gloria," he replied, "Go away! Don't bother me! If la Gloria wants to be seen, let her come to me!" She could remember, too, the angels with very high wings, glittering with silver paper brought in the sailing vessels from China.

Considerable latitude must have been allowed for local variations. Alfred Robinson, in his *Life in California*, published in 1846, describes *Los Pastores* as presented in 1829 at the midnight mass in San Diego's Presidio Chapel, and instead of one, "there were six females representing shepherdesses, three men and a boy. One of the men personified Lucifer, one a hermit, and the other Bartolo, a lazy good-for-nothing, whilst the boy represented the archangel Gabriel."



Christmas Shepherds, from a painting in a church in Mexico City. (In Anita Brenner's *Idols Behind Altars*, New York, 1929).

The one startling piece of information, besides the costuming, that Garner's version provides us is the matter of the masks used by some of the actors. In no other account of the drama that we have seen is there a mention of this most ancient custom, still carried on in the *Nochebuena pastorela* of certain Mexican Indian tribes, notably the Yaqui and Mayo, which had most flourishing missions under the Jesuit padres.

Among the boys of the audience, the obvious hero of the play was the Devil, who did everything that they were supposed to refrain from. Second in popularity was the archangel Michael, according to Arthur Bandini, writing in the *Californian Illustrated Magazine* of 1892. This was principally because the angel and the Foul Fiend put on a rousing sword fight as the climax of the play. This last scene occurred outside of the church, and all observers are agreed that although the Shepherds' Play was reverent and edifying before the altar, once it had emerged from the chapel into the street or plaza, the clowning became uppermost.

Bandini tells how the Devil, worsted in his battle against Saint Michael, a mere boy, would rise in simulated wrath and rush with hideous shrieks at some impressionable young Indian in the inner circle of the crowd. Superstitious fear lent wings to the frightened Indian as, with the Evil One bounding close behind, he ran for dear life around the gathering, afraid to leave the torchlight and human companionship. The chase, uproariously cheered on by the spectators, usually came to a close when the despairing fugitive, feeling the whack of the pursuer's sword, halted, drew his knife, and prepared to sell his soul dearly.

As Colton describes it, the whole cast adjourned the day after Christmas to the house of the chief magistrate (in this case himself) to pay their respects. "The large hall, occupying the center of the building, was sufficiently ample to accommodate them, and some fifty gentlemen and ladies as spectators. They brought their own orchestral accompani-

ment, which consisted entirely of violins and guitars. Their prelude had so many sweet harmonies that the listener determined to listen on.

"The dialogue and chant of the shepherds would have awakened their appropriate associations, but for the obtrusions of the hermit, hunter and devil, who now gave much freer scope to their characteristic peculiarities than they did in the church. The hermit forgot that his lash was intended for himself, and began to use it on others. The hunter left off snaring birds, and commenced setting springes to catch Satan; but his intended victim not only managed to escape, but to decoy the hunter himself into his own net. The hermit tried to disenchant him through the power of his missal; but this having no effect, he threatened to chastise the subtle author of the mischief, but wanted someone to seize and hold him, for fear his horn, hoof, or tail might come in conflict with the life-glass.

"During this side-acting, the dialogue and chant of the shepherds went on, though it would be difficult to conceive of any two things more wide asunder in their spirit and effect. The whole was concluded with the *riata*-dance, by the shepherds, who executed its airy movements with a lightness and precision of step that would have thrown enchantment on any occasion less sacred in its associations than the present."

William Garner's review of this scene clears up a very dubious impression left by Colton's use of the word "*riata* (sic) dance." Left to our own imagination, we probably picture the shepherds and shepherdess twirling lassos and jumping gracefully in and out of the nooses. Nothing of the sort. It appears to have been actually a kind of May-pole dance, and the word "*reata* dance" comes from the Spanish verb "*reatar*:" to wrap ropes around a mast to strengthen it.

"After having performed in the church, they go to the *alcalde* and ask permission to perform in his house . . . Then a dance is arranged in the following style. A man sits in a chair in the middle of the room, holding a staff, to the top of which are fixed six scarfs of different colors. Each of the shepherds, with the shepherdess, takes a hold of the lower end of one of these scarfs, and the fidler plays up a Spanish reel, — the six persons dancing round the staff until all the scarfs are fairly platted (*platted*) on the pole which the man in the center is holding, and when they have but about a foot of the scarfs left in their hands, they turn about and dance back again, unplatted a turn every time each person dances around, until the whole is unplatted from the pole, when the whole affair comes to a conclusion. The dance is only made use of when the farce is performed at private houses, but never in the church.

"After having exhibited at (the civil magistrate's) house, they go from one house to another until they have visited all the principal houses in the town. If a person sends for them to perform at his house, they expect to be paid for it at the rate of at least \$1 for each performer; but when they visit a house of their own accord, they are satisfied with a luncheon of cake, cheese, wine, &c. As soon as the time for this diversion is past, the ribbons, beads, and all the other articles that may have been used for the occasion are returned to the owners, generally speaking, very little worse for the wear."

Both Mary Greene's questioning of the old-timers of Monterey and Bandini's recollections leave us the impression that "the *pastores* were huge feeders. At every house they visited, they were treated to *bumelos*,—sweetened cakes fried crisp in grease." All agreed that Christmas was a time of happiness, of feasting. One old man, when I asked if they had celebrated *Las Posadas*, answered, "Oh, yes, indeed! That was the one time in the year that the poor had all they wanted to eat. They journeyed from house to house, and all the more fortunate families had piles of food ready to be served to their more humble neighbors."

This by no means ended the festivities which Christmas ushered in. *Cascarones* had already made their appearance. Piecing together Garner's comments on this old California custom, we find that: "The *Pastores* being over, egg-breaking comes on, and although it is not yet time for the latter, which ought not to begin until after old Christmas day, there have been already some thousands broken on people's heads; in short, a person can scarcely enter a house at present, where there are any young females, without being saluted

with a slap on the head; and as the ladies of California are by no means weak in the muscles of the arm, it often happens that a person will receive a Herculean blow that will set his ears ringing for a whole day. Of course, any and every persons is at perfect liberty to return the compliment without the least affront being taken, the act being looked upon rather as a token of esteem than anything else.

"The young men and women procure as many as they can, and woe betide the young fellow who breaks an egg on a female's head where there are four or five young women; they will be sure to take ample revenge by breaking as many on his head as they possibly can find opportunity for, generally drenching him from head to foot with Cologne water.

"What this breaking of egg-shells originated from, I have not been able to learn; although I have often made the inquiry from persons who I supposed ought to have been able to give the information; that is to say, if it has any meaning at all; but I never could receive anything like a satisfactory account. The eggs are pricked at both ends and blown in the same manner that our boys blow bird's eggs for stringing; then one end is stopped with a small piece of wax, or tallow; the eggshell is then filled with scented water, and this end stopped up in the same manner as the former. But there is another way of fixing them, and which is more costly. This is by filling the eggshell with very small bits of colored ribbon, and painting or rather besmearing it with some coloring matter on the outside.

"This amusement always begins on the 6th day of January directly after church and lasts without interruption until Ash Wednesday morning before church; and from about a fortnight before, until Ash Wednesday, these eggshells will sell for a dollar each. Even now the empty shells sell for six and a quarter cents. It is only by watching the hen that lays, and seizing the egg, that a person can get an egg for breakfast.

"This will appear incredible to persons unacquainted with the value of eggshells in California, but during this season, a public dance or fandango is got up about every two days for the special purpose of breaking these eggshells on one another's heads, and I have actually seen a man pawn his horse and saddle, when he knew he had not the means of redeeming them, for money to buy eggshells, and I am certain that I may say without exaggeration that in the six towns that Upper California contains, there are spent at least \$3,000 for eggshells prepared as I have described during two months in each year."

Colton, as usual, can be relied upon for a lively anecdote. "As I was sitting in the house of an old Californian today, conversing very quietly about the condition of the country, I felt something break on my head, and starting around, discovered two large black eyes, lighted with their triumph . . . The rules of this frolic do not allow you to take offense, whatever may be your age or the gravity of your profession: you have only one alternative, and that is, to retaliate if you can . . . The antagonist is always of the opposite sex. You must return these shots or encounter a railery, which is even worse. Having finished my chat, I bade my good old Californian friend, and his daughter, my egg-shell opponent, good morning; but turned into a shop, procured an egg or two, and re-entered the mansion of my friend by a side door, where I watched for my victim. A few moments brought her along, all-unconscious of her danger. I slipped from my covert, and, unperceived, dashed the showering egg on her head. Her locks floated in cologne. I was avenged, and now stood square with the world, so far as egg-breaking is concerned."

As might be expected, occasionally spirits became exhilarated in the fray, and Alfred Robinson relates, "as the excitement grows warm and their ammunition becomes nearly exhausted, they resort to wet napkins, which they slap at each other. From these they have recourse to tumblers of water, from these to pitchers, and from pitchers to buckets, until, tired and exhausted by the exercise, they desist . . . Among the persons invited (to a fiesta) were Padre Antonio Jimeno and Padre Antonio Menendez. At the close of the evening, when buckets were in constant requisition, the two *frailes* became heated, and attacked each other with floods of water. Menendez, the weaker of the two, retreated to an adjoining dormitory . . ." and when Padre Jimeno pursued his advantage to the very door, he

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met with a barrage of bedroom crockery that cost him two front teeth and put an effectual end to the fun.

The colorful and delightful Christmas plays in the churches have been silent for almost a hundred years now. When Father Mestres, he who had done so much to revive interest in the early day traditions, was alive, an attempt was made to bring *Los Pastores* back and have a real early California Christmas, but no one could be found who could remember the costumes nor the wording, so that the proposal had to be dropped. With the information in this article and the publication this month by the California Historical Society of a *Pastorela*, composed in part by Padre Florencio Ibanez at Soledad Mission sometime between 1803 and 1818, and available in the original Spanish at the Bancroft Library of the University of California and the Antonio Coronel Collection in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, History and Science, perhaps the Monterey Peninsula may again see Lucifer come stalking into church while the Shepherds sing the song that has echoed down the ages.

(Special Note: The whimsical drawings that grace our front page and give the key to this article are the work of Maxine Albro Hall, a creative Peninsula artist of long standing. We are greatly indebted to her for her kindness in laying down her brushes and taking up the pen on behalf of the editors.)

—Donald M. Craig

* * *

COSAS DE INTERES PARA LOS SOCIOS

NEW MEMBERS:

LIFE: Mr. George Sims

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* * *

GIFTS: Mrs. Florence Juvinall, of Napa has presented a set of early California furniture, a couch and six chairs; Mr. and Mrs. Lee Kellogg of Carmel have given an old almanac and a candle snuffer.

* * *

REMINDER: The annual membership meeting will be held the evening of the first Monday in January. Announcement of the program will be mailed to members.