

CHAPTER XXI

Home-life in Mexico—The young Mexican and his career—Strange customs—Visiting—Divorce—Assimilation of European ideas—Retention of Mexican customs—Exclusiveness in family life—The Mexican lady—Shopping formerly and to-day—Playing "Bear"—Mexican love-making—Fleeing the foreigner—Mexican tradesmen's dodges—A case of "Caveat emptor"—Smoking—Use of tobacco general—Mexican tobacco.

HOME-LIFE in Mexico is very beautiful, and comes very near to that which used to prevail in England and the United States of America, say, five-and-twenty years ago, before woman, the creative goddess of our homes, became "emancipated," and thus lost her charm and influence. Domestic affection is the ruling phase of Mexican home-life, and it is as apparent in the poorest hut as in the most magnificent palace, such as so many of the wealthy families possess.

Especially are the male members of the home petted and made much of, perhaps too much so in the opinions of the more hardy and matter-of-fact sons of the Anglo-Saxon race, who, as a rule, prepare to spread their wings and desert the mother's nest as soon as they can fly. And how many who leave never come back to it!

How frequently must the old birds have sat and yearned—ever expectant and ever disappointed—for a glimpse of some member of that unruly but loveable young brood which they reared with so much care and at so much personal sacrifice, and who turned his back upon the sheltering roof as soon as he felt the allurements of the outer world! Alas! poor father; alas! fond mother! Your reward must be sought in the knowledge that your loved bairn is doing well out there in the wide-wide world, that he thinks of you often and fondly,



FISHING ON LAKE CHAPALA—DRAWING THE NET.



Photos. Winfield Scott.

NATIVE BOAT ON LAKE CHAPALA.

and that you have done your duty as far as your means and opportunities would allow.

The young Mexican does not travel much abroad. His place is nearly always near the parent tree, and even were the spirit of travel and adventure to be strong within him, the home influence and the parents' pleading would suffice to keep him near them. Even to go away as far as a neighbouring State or the next town is looked upon adversely if it can be obviated, but it often has to be undertaken. Nearly all young Mexicans, having employment in the banks, stores or factories in the cities as well as the towns, live with their parents or their parents' relatives, and the passion for "Chambers" or separate flats, so common with the rising generation of Britishers, or for club-life with Americans, finds but little reflection in the young Mexican.

The girls of the family never leave the parental home until the day of their marriage, and very often they do not quit it even then, but share it with their husband, and thus add to its membership. This is the custom also in Chile, where the parents and the grandparents are treated with the utmost deference, their advice solicited and their opinions bowed to; while the much-despised "mother-in-law" of our own lands is the enshrined deity of the Spanish-American household, and rules there omnipotent and unopposed.

With all this home affection, the young Mexican is by no means a milk-sop. He is a keen sportsman, and, as the history of the country sufficiently shows, he makes a plucky and willing soldier. His reverence for his mother and father is among the most beautiful traits in his character, for he believes with Coleridge—"A mother is a mother still, the holiest thing alive."

When a Mexican family goes out visiting, it proceeds in force, and without warning. I remember how on one occasion, while I was staying with a newly-arrived American family, the lady, unaccustomed to the ways of the Mexicans, evinced the greatest horror when, one afternoon, no fewer than eleven visitors stalked solemnly into her drawing-room, entirely uninvited and as entirely unexpected. They consisted of the mother, the grandmother, four grown-up daughters, two boys, their sister, and a baby-in-arms with its nurse. It was with

the greatest difficulty that seating accommodation was found for this small army of invaders, but they seemed perfectly self-possessed, helping to bring in a few additional chairs from the adjoining bedrooms, and steadfastly occupying them for just three-quarters of an hour. At the end of that time they arose in a body, shook hands all round, and as solemnly marched away in single file, having performed their duty without a single omission. The look of relief which dawned upon my hostess's pretty face when the back of the last of the visitors had disappeared was intense; only it then occurred to her that she had been guilty of great inhospitality in not having offered them any refreshments. "But, how could I!" she exclaimed pathetically; "I haven't enough teacups, and I'm awfully short of spoons!"

So far divorce in Mexico has attained but very slight headway, the Republic being as a Roman Catholic country deprived of the "advantages" of divorce, except by direct license from the Vatican. With the gradual Americanising of Mexico, however, possibly a change may come over the situation; but never can this amount to anything approaching the condition of things in the Sister Republic, where the divorce laws have long been a universal scandal. That the United States can boast of as many as 700,000 divorces in one year, with an allotment of 200 to Chicago for one day's work, seems almost incredible. The total is more than for the whole of Europe, Australia and the entire British Dominions. Since 1880 this crying evil has been growing in the United States, but I see little or no probability of its spread across the border, for divorce in Mexico, as in all Spanish-American countries, is unpopular, and the law is by no means indulgent towards its being granted except under very exceptional circumstances.

In spite of their propensity for assimilating a great many European ideas and customs, the Mexicans of the higher class still rigorously maintain a great number of their own, and the time has fortunately not come when one can sing with the charming poetess, Catherine Fenshawe—

"Such pains, such pleasures now alike are o'er;
And beaux and etiquette shall soon exist no more."

The ladies of Mexico in particular are very punctilious as to

the observance of certain rules of etiquette, especially in regard to new arrivals. It is the new-comer who is expected to make the advances, just the reverse of the custom with English people; and if he or she neglects to do so, then social ostracism is certain to be the penalty. Thus, a new arrival in any City or town of Mexico, although his or her advent may be known to every man, woman and child in the community, and may have been publicly discussed for weeks beforehand, must solemnly announce the fact in print, and send a copy of such communication to everybody of consequence in the town. No one is exempt from this: newly-accredited Ministers, diplomats and other distinguished visitors, in fact anyone and every one who is desirous of being received into the local society. Letters of introduction are also *de rigueur*, and while the average Mexican is invariably polite and courteous to the stranger, he is only friendly and hospitable to the individual *bien recommandé*. In this respect he is like every other Spaniard that I have ever met. It makes his acquaintance all the more worth cultivating, for it means that he is discriminating in the choice of his guests and particular—very—as to whom he introduces to his women-folk.

While the more conservative heads of some of the old Mexican families still maintain rigidly their privacy and reserve, neither visiting nor receiving any but their most intimate friends, the emancipation of the younger generation has proceeded apace. Whereas a dozen or twenty years ago no Mexican lady would descend from her carriage when shopping, but would expect the storekeeper to bring out all his wares to exhibit before her—no matter how inconvenient to him or to the passers-by—to-day Mexican ladies conduct their bargaining at the counters, like their less monastic sisters, and otherwise attend personally to all their household requirements. They go about unattended, instead of closely veiled and with a 'duenna'; they play golf, tennis and even attend polo matches, as spectators only *bien entendu*; they send their girls to school instead of educating them at home, and generally pursue the lines of European or American women.

Perhaps so violent a wrenching away from the time-honoured customs of their grandmothers was somewhat of a shock to

their more conservative relatives; the same effect was produced upon parents of the Early Victorian Era, when British maidens threw off the yoke and became "new girls." If something has been lost, and some "modern women" have adopted methods which repel rather than attract, and abuse a freedom which they have not yet learned to understand, something has also been gained. Women, both in Europe and Mexico, are more companionable, more dependable, and more healthful than they were; they are less like slaves, and the life which they live is more in accordance with their position as man's companion.

It was a long time before Mexican ladies took kindly to the purely British custom of "five-o'clock tea." To do them bare justice, they did their best to approve of the social duty, and to join in with these Anglo-Saxon

"Matrons who toss the cup and see
The grounds of fate in the grounds of tea."

But in the end a sort of compromise at all such functions has been arrived at. In addition to the beverage which cheers but does not inebriate, and which to the average Mexican is an exotic and more of a medicine than a luxury, champagne is nearly always served, or some other sweet wine, for the ladies, and sherry for the men. The modified "five o'clock" now suits every one, and promises to become a permanent institution.

In courtship, "playing bear"—that is, standing outside the window of your *inamorata* for hours on the chance of catching her attention and favour—is equivalent to our "walking-out," and both forms are practised among the middle and lower classes only. The numerous ceremonies incumbent upon those individuals who indulge in courting among the higher classes of the community would require a whole volume to describe in detail. Proposals only come about after a lengthy term of courtship, and by mutual consent. The first overtures are made to the father, if there is one, or to the mother if there is not, the girl coming-in only after permission has been given by the parent or guardian. Marriage is not a *sine qua non* to courtship, and many an interchange of love passages ends in nothing serious, and neither side considers

the collapse of the negotiations as "jilting." The greater the difficulties of communication between the lovers the more vigorously do they pursue their meetings, for, "pleased with the danger when the waves rise high, they seek the storms."

It has been said by an observant Mexican that were the youths and maidens of his country to exhibit as much talent and ingenuity in their respective callings as they do in reaching one another, their American and other foreign competitors would have a hard time in keeping up with them. Escape from his parents' house at the witching midnight hour, climbing of his *novia's* walls, hiding for hours in barns and behind house-corners play prominent part in the young Mexican's wooing. Disguises, false impersonations, swoonings upon the part of the fair lady, hysterics at appropriate moments, prayers, petitions and pathetic appeals to stern authority all form part of the proceedings, and even "elopements," when the obtaining of the parental consent is, perhaps, only a question of time and marriage upon the most prosaic and respectable lines would follow as a matter of course, are exceedingly popular with the romantic young men and maidens of modern Mexico. Letters delivered by means of balloons, spare or stolen latch-keys; the bribing of servants and duennas, and all other methods known to those "who in courtship dream but in wedlock wake," are practised to the fullest extent.

The girls of a family are usually very carefully watched by their parents or guardians, and are afforded but little real freedom as Europeans understand the term. Letters addressed to them are almost invariably opened and read before passing into the hands of the addressees.

Nevertheless many surreptitious *billets-doux* escape the scrutiny of the watchful parents, and the excitement of receiving and answering forbidden letters is especially sweet to the youthful correspondents.

The faithful swain is subjected to all sorts of penalties to prove his fidelity, such as abandoning the habits of smoking, drinking or gambling; attendance at Church at stated intervals; payment into the saving's bank of some well-known saint, and the purchase of certain remembrances—perfume, gloves or *dulces*—for the fair exacting one. This goes on for a full year before any kind of engagement is even

spoken about. Then the platonic gives way to the serious part of the courtship, and finally parental objections being overcome (if they exist) the day is named and the "bear" comes into his own. From that moment all the romance dies out, and the cold prosaic pursuit of married life commences.

Shopping in Mexico generally—but not to-day so much in the Capital as was the case at one time—is a matter requiring much forethought and finessing. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to rely upon the integrity of the vendors, who often have one price for the Mexicans and another, very much higher, for the stranger within their gates. Several times this has happened to an American lady of my acquaintance, who, in spite of her very non-Mexican appearance, speaks Spanish perfectly. She assured me that on two or three occasions she had overheard the proprietor of an establishment instruct his assistant to show her some of last season's goods and to charge her "American prices."

Although many of the establishments mark their goods in "plain figures," these must not be accepted as final. Negotiation, if conducted with sufficient spirit and determination, usually results in some kind of compromise, which the vendor calls "special discount." But call it by any name he likes, he has to yield it, and the purchaser is not generally particular about the term employed. When one goes shopping in Mexico it is certainly a case of *caveat emptor*.

A veteran smoker once declared that to smoke a cigar through a mouthpiece is equivalent to kissing a lady through a respirator. Nevertheless the practice is very commonly indulged-in in Mexico, and cigarette smoking is conducted in the same way. Practically every man and many women smoke, the habit being, as in all Spanish countries, second nature with the great majority of the inhabitants. At early morn the practice is commenced, and continues almost unintermittently through the entire day. The Mexicans are somewhat wasteful, too, in their smoking, for those who do not use mouthpieces generally discard their cigarette before they are two-thirds finished, and the ends litter the sidewalks of the streets and the *patios* of the houses. The Mexicans have not as yet contracted the unpleasant habit of

chewing tobacco, so popular with Americans of a certain class, nor do they take very much snuff—a habit of our grandfathers and even our grandmothers. Cigarettes are so cheap that few take the trouble to make their own. Under the chapters dealing with tobacco-growing and tobacco-manufacturing I give particulars of the cigarettes sold in Mexico. The native-grown leaf is preferred to any of foreign origin, and connoisseurs declare that certainly there is nothing finer-grown than Mexican tobacco. Just as our forefathers tendered their snuff-boxes to their friends or acquaintances, so do the Mexicans proffer their cigarette-cases; and it is considered impolitic to refuse, even if one be a non-smoker. One sees but very few pipes in use, though occasionally perhaps among some old Indian man or woman. The cigarette is universal; the cigar quite common. All the employees in the banks, counting-houses and many of the shops, the soldiery, the police and the Government officials, are permitted to smoke during business hours, and freely avail themselves of the privilege.