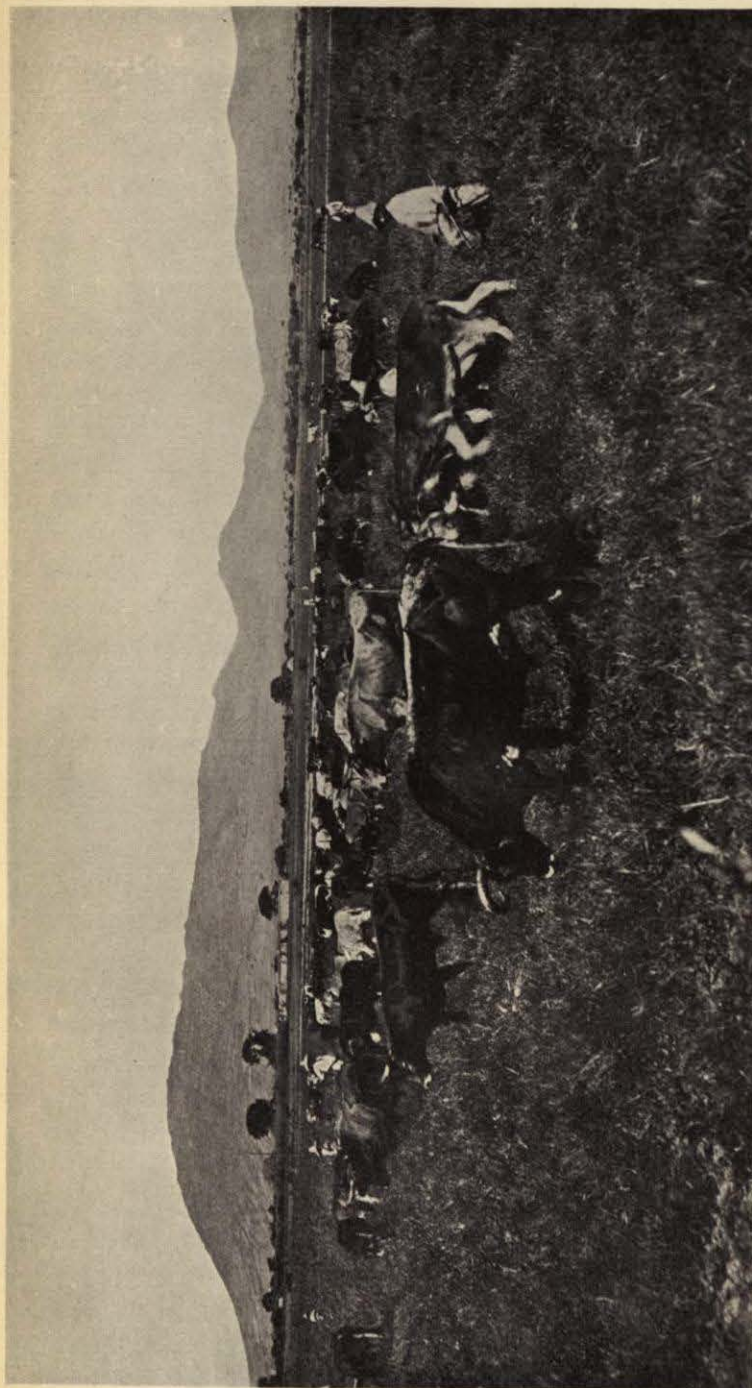


## CHAPTER XXII

Hotel accommodation—Schemes for improvement—Rates, etc.—Railway hotels—Establishments in Mexico City—The Sanz—The Palace—The St. Francis—The Iturbide—The Reforma—The San Carlos—The Gillow, etc.—Provincial hotels—Charges and accommodation—Restaurants in Mexico City—Sylvain's—Chapultepec Café—Boarding establishments—Prices of foods—Drugs, perfumery, etc.—Provisioning the city.

THE first brilliant and confident idea which occurs to the average visitor to Mexico, or to the business-man in search of a "scheme," is—"What a grand opening for a Hotel!" He speaks of his notion with bated breath to a few intimates, fearful lest so original a conception should gain publicity and should thereby encounter rivalry. But he soon finds that he is the last of a long list of promoters having precisely similar notions, and he pursues the scheme only to discover that hopeless obstacles beset his path.

First and foremost, the necessary land in the necessary position at the necessary purchase price is unobtainable. Land in Mexico City located in every eligible district is so closely held, and even when offered for sale is rated at such inflated values, that a Croesus might hesitate before closing with an offer. Secondly, the question of furnishing a hotel, when once it is built, is a most serious one, owing to the heavy import duties levied upon all classes of furniture, fixtures, decorations and materials. Thirdly, the all-important servant problem must be confronted, and here, above all, hopeless failure seems inevitable, for good European servants cannot be induced to remain in Mexico, even when bound by solemn contract endorsed by the Consul, and Mexican servants are impossible. Thus, to use an Americanism very appropriate to the occasion, the man with the hotel idea "falls down"



A MEXICAN HERD OF CATTLE.

on every phase of his project, and he retires discouraged whence he came.

That the hotel scheme has at last found some backers, and that a house has been built at length, does not in any way affect my observations, because the individuals who have performed the feat are not visitors or strangers to Mexico, but some of the most prominent Mexican business-men in the Republic. One of them was the owner of the much-coveted land upon which the edifice has been built; another was a Government official with great influence and "friends at Court," while all who participated in the enterprise are capitalists. That the hotel, "to be conducted upon the most approved European principles," will succeed is to be hoped; but the much-vexed servant question has by no means been satisfactorily settled, nor do I believe it likely that it ever will be. Efforts to train servants of Mexican nationality have always proved unsuccessful from European and American ideas, and not all the capital nor all the influence nor all the ability of the astute gentlemen who are behind the latest hotel enterprise will succeed in converting "a sow's ear into a silken purse." The famous M. Ritz of London and Paris hotel celebrity was consulted on the question of running a modern hotel at Mexico City; and even he failed to see where complete or even partial success could be achieved in view of the domestic servant problem.

So far as the building and the equipment of the new hotel are concerned, there can be little doubt that everything possible is being done. The situation is unique, being at the corner of the two finest thoroughfares in Mexico City, *viz.*, the Paséo de la Reforma and Bucareli facing the bronze equestrian statue of Charles IV., and with a magnificent sweep of roadway before it. No less a sum than \$1,250,000 (£125,000) is being expended upon the building, there being about 300 rooms in the 5-story edifice, the ground alone having cost \$700,000, say £70,000.

The Railway Companies of Mexico with terminals in the City have long cherished the idea of constructing conjointly a large central hotel for the accommodation of transient travellers and tourists; but the idea has hitherto failed to find concrete form. I have seen the plans for a gigantic

8-story building to be erected as a railway hotel in Dallas, Texas, and something of a similar nature was at one time projected for Mexico City. The National Railway has already erected a modest establishment at Oriental, having vainly endeavoured to induce others than themselves to undertake the scheme. I am afraid that the National Railway has found the enterprise rather less profitable than it hoped.

The owner of some mineral-water springs at Tehuacán, on the Southern Railway Company's system, was to construct a hotel there, having formed a syndicate with a capital of \$600,000 (£60,000) for the purpose, and certainly no resort more requires good hotel accommodation than Tehuacán.

Up till now Mexico City with all its European innovations, North American comforts and conveniences and general up-to-date character, has failed to provide a really first-class hotel. There are, it is true, many establishments to be found which describe themselves as "first-class," but probably few outside their proprietors would be prepared to swear to that description upon oath.

The Sanz and the St. Francis are the two most expensive hotels in the City of Mexico, but not necessarily, therefore, the best. The former is favourably situated in the business section, and faces the site of the new National Theatre, now in course of erection. Although at present, and probably for the next two or three years, the neighbourhood derives but little advantage beyond a terrific noise caused by the legion of men at work on the building, as soon as it is erected the new edifice will materially add to the attractions of the Sanz Hotel locality, already enjoying the proximity of the beautiful Alameda, probably one of the finest public parks in the new or old world. The St. Francis, a moderately new building, is located further towards the residential part of the City, and is a well-conducted, clean, but expensive house.

By far the choicest situation is that of the Reforma, located on the Paséo de la Reforma, and the greater part of whose windows look out upon that incomparable thoroughfare. The building requires considerable repairs and alterations, which, I understand, the proprietor, Dr. O. Nibbi, an accomplished and courteous host, would be willing to introduce if he were able to procure a tolerably long lease. He has, however, a

difficult landlord to deal with, during whose lifetime, probably, little can be done.

Another hotel, quite close at hand, is the Pan-American, with a very few sleeping-rooms and only poor attendance, but a magnificent front view of the Paséo. The Astoria, also on the Paséo, is a glorified boarding-house with a limited amount of space, but unlimited charges for accommodation. The principal establishments situated in the centre of the busy city, and, therefore, preferred by a good many visitors to Mexico, include the Iturbide, a vast but somewhat comfortless building, formerly belonging to the great Iturbide family which gave an Emperor to the country. The Iturbide Hotel answers to what is known as an "apartment-house," the numerous rooms, single or in suites, being rented furnished by the day, week or month. No meals are served by the management, visitors being free to dine or sup where they will. The neighbourhood being amply supplied with restaurants they find no difficulty in this direction. The San Carlos, which adjoins, is really part of the same building; the Bazar; the Coliséo; the Gillow; the Guardiola (now known as Kingman's); the Jardin, with a very attractive garden, but a poor outlook for the majority of the bedrooms; the Palace, a commodious and well-furnished building suffering greatly from the noise proceeding from three streets which it faces; Porter's, also located in one of the noisiest streets of the City—namely, the San Francisco; the Bristol and Sonora, an old-fashioned and rambling building having rooms with unhealthily low ceilings and unsuspected, dangerous staircases; and several others of less moment. The cheaper classes of houses are frequently met with, but they are mostly patronized by middle-class and working customers, and are little more than eating and boarding establishments.

Of Restaurants, the City possesses a fairly good number, and several with first-class *cuisines*. The establishment *par excellence* is that of the Chapultepec Café, situated at the entrance to the beautiful Chapultepec Park, with its historic Castle. Here the fashionable throng foregathers on Sundays and feast days to partake of luncheon; and it is here that the principal banquets and similar social entertainments are held. The *cuisine* is certainly good, if not sufficiently varied.

Sylvain's is a second edition of the "Café-de-la-Paix," in Paris, and since it was rebuilt and refurnished is regarded as the best restaurant in the City, and fully equal to that of Chapultepec, which is outside the City. The Café de Paris is noted for its excellent fish, and is worthy of its high reputation. The Café Colon is well known for the fine string-band which plays there nightly, but its *cuisine* would seem to be a secondary consideration. The Iturbide Restaurant, independent of the Hotel of the same name, is a well-conducted and moderately-priced establishment, owned by a very courteous Frenchman, who, with the characteristic good sense of his countrymen, looks after the comforts of his customers by attending to them personally. The restaurant is *al fresco*, and here also an admirable string-band, with some blind but highly-talented musicians composing it, plays at luncheon and dinner daily. The Guardiola, or Kingman's Restaurant, is very popular, especially so with supper-parties, and is well looked after by the proprietor, Mr. Kingman. The Jardin Restaurant offers good value for the humble \$1.00 (2s.) in the shape of either luncheon or dinner, and is considerably patronized at all times. The St. Francis Restaurant, attached to the Hotel of that name, is moderately good, but the tariff is high. Porter's, Gambrino's and Bach's are fair of their kind, but neither ranks as absolutely first-class.

The provincial hotels, with some notable exceptions, such as the Franco at Zacatecas and the Richelieu at Durango, are cheap, but very comfortless. The rates vary from \$3 to \$5 (Mex.), say, 6s. to 10s. a day, which include bedroom and three meals, without wine or baths. Their situations are usually in the middle of the busiest thoroughfares, the attendance is extremely poor and the food essentially Mexican, which means that many dishes, mostly of a greasy nature, are served at the selfsame moment, and consisting of as many as nine or ten different meats and vegetables. Fish is but seldom served, and when it is found it is rarely fresh. It is difficult to procure any special cooking, even when extra payment is offered. The proprietors of the hotels are much in the hands of their servants, to whose moods and whims they are veritable slaves, and any additional or unusual work demanded of them may lead to their prompt departure in high dudgeon. Thus,

while the managerial spirit may be willing, the flesh is, of a necessity, weak.

"The cost of living" in Mexico is a very difficult question to determine. Not only do people differ considerably as to what is meant by the words "dear" and "cheap," and construe them according to the manner in which their bringing-up enables them to look at the prices of things, but the different localities must be taken into consideration. When, therefore, public writers declare that "the cost of living in Mexico is expensive," they as often as not refer to their experiences in Mexico City, and take no heed of the vastly different charges for almost all kinds of articles of food, house rental and domestic service which obtain in large provincial towns such as Guadalajara, Puebla, etc., etc.

To be fair, however, and to afford some accurate idea of what it actually does cost to live in Mexico, each State should be separately treated—for the conditions prevailing are totally unlike—and due regard should be paid to the social condition of the individual seeking or supplying the information. I do not propose to do more than afford my readers, who may be interested in the question, some cursory knowledge of ordinary market prices which rule in Mexico City. Even here, however, I may point out that the figures vary considerably from day to day, and every housekeeper finds it impossible to regulate his or her expenses to any given standard, a wide margin having to be allowed for the seasons, for instance, when certain classes of goods are plentiful or scarce; to the number of religious *fiestas*, at which periods very little market produce comes to the cities; and to numerous other contingencies with which European or American purchasers seldom concern themselves.

No doubt Americans, who are accustomed to pay rather heavily for all necessaries, house-rental, food, laundry, domestic service, etc., and who experience the delightful novelty of getting two Mexican dollars in exchange for every American dollar, at first consider that they have come to a housekeeper's paradise. But the delusion soon wears away, and they find themselves face to face with many expenses upon which they never calculated, and certain drawbacks to perfect comfort and convenience which they escape almost

entirely in their own country. Less so is this the case with European visitors, or settlers, in Mexico, since the prices of things here are more regulated to the standards of European markets than to those of the United States.

Houses in the City of Mexico are undoubtedly dear—that is to say, houses suitable for well-to-do people who like several bedrooms, baths and other necessary arrangements. The rentals, which vary with the locality, may be put at from \$150 to \$500 (Mex.) a month, say \$75 to \$250 (U.S. Cy.), or £15 to £50. Furnished Apartments and unfurnished *viviendas*, *i.e.*, flats, again, differ considerably, being dependant upon the locality. In the city, or business portion of Mexico City, one may obtain from 3 to 6 rooms, unfurnished, at one-half the figure that one would have to pay in any one of the new "Colonias." Such accommodation in any of the provincial towns, such as Leon, Oaxaca, Guadalajara, Monterey or Tampico, could be found for, probably, one-third the prices asked in Mexico City.

Boarding is moderate, first-class accommodation being obtainable at numerous well-kept establishments (American, English, French and German) for about \$50 (say, £5) per month; while many of the restaurants will arrange board at from \$30 to \$40 monthly. The fare provided is generally very good, but not elaborate. Domestic Service, with which subject I deal very fully in a separate chapter, is both expensive and unsatisfactory; and in fact forms one of the greatest trials of the housekeeper's life. It is customary in Mexico to pay the landlord at least one month's rent in advance, and foreigners making but a short stay are sometimes asked to pay one-half or even the whole amount due before taking possession. In some cases where the whole rent is not forthcoming a surety is demanded, and as to-day landlords are the masters of the situation and the tenants the suppliants, these arrangements have of a necessity to be complied with. Sureties, however, are not always easy to be obtained by new or unknown comers, and this not unseldom proves the rock upon which the negotiations split.

The real expensiveness of living in Mexico comes when one has to clothe oneself and one's family, and provide general household supplies.

English clothes, boots, saddlery and harness, hats, gloves, and under-linen, when obtainable, are from one to one and-a-half times as expensive as at home. Thus, a £3 3s. suit in England would cost from £5 5s. to £7 7s. here, and not very well made at that. English saddles are priced at £21 (no doubt cheaper ones can be found, but I never came across any), boots for ordinary wear are from £1 10s. to £2 per pair, and riding-boots from £4 to £6. Neckties and gloves, handkerchiefs and shirts are from 50 to 150 per cent. higher than we pay at home. American goods are somewhat less, the duties remaining the same, but the goods are of a rather inferior grade, while American manufacturers are contented with smaller profits, and pay less freight on account of the lesser distance for transportation.

Women's wear, French goods, hats, gloves, laces and such-like wares are much about the same as one would pay in Europe; but dressmaking, I understand, is somewhat cheaper, because all labour in Mexico is less well-paid than in Europe or the United States. Furniture, much of which comes in from the United States, is at least 50 per cent. more than one would pay for it in America, and what local furniture is made is generally of a fine and even luxurious nature (there is a factory, for instance, at San Luis Potosi, which turns out as excellent articles as one would find in either London, Paris or Vienna), and is consequently very expensive. All such appointments as gasoliers, electroliers, wall-papers, stoves, kitchen utensils, lavatory equipments, etc., etc., range from 25 to 50 per cent. higher than at home, articles of native manufacture, strangely enough, being almost as highly-priced as those which are imported.

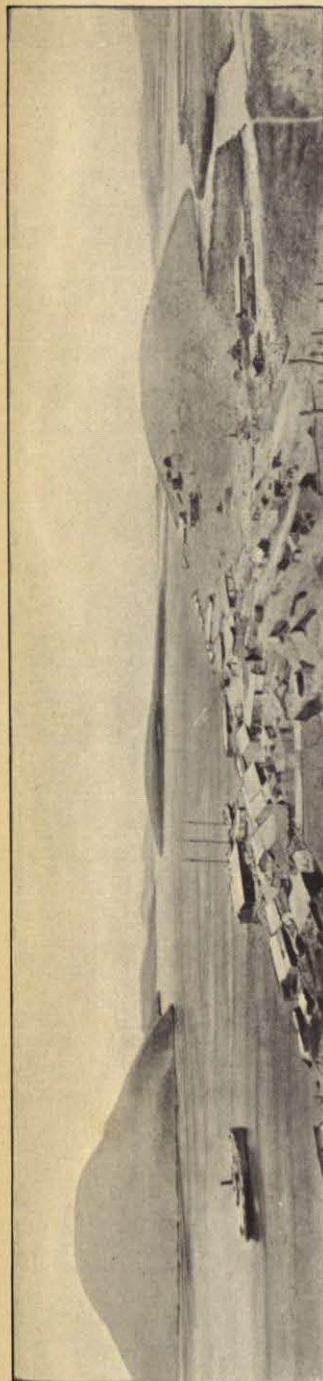
In regard to food-supplies, as I have said, the market prices are as elastic as the consciences of the vendors who recommend their wares. The Mexican trader is no more rapacious than his American or European brother; but, then, he is no less. Fruit and vegetables are practically the cheapest things that one can buy, except, perhaps, flowers, which are both plentiful and extremely beautiful. Strawberries can be purchased all the year round at from 25 c. (6d.) to 50 c. (1s.) a large basketful. Bananas, pineapples, mangoes, avocado pears, small tree-pears, lemons and plums are plentiful in

their proper seasons, and cheap. Vegetables, such as potatoes, cauliflowers, sweet potatoes, peas, beans, yams and tomatoes are sold at about the prices ruling in England and America; if anything, somewhat less. Eggs are sold at 50 centavos (1s.) a dozen, and lean chickens at from 25 cents (6d.) to \$1.00 (2s.) a-piece. Turkeys I have seen sold in the country towns at from \$3 to \$5 (say 6s. to 10s.), and at \$8 (16s.) in the City. In the latter case I fancy the fair purchaser knew less about the value of the birds than was desirable; but she appeared to consider that she had secured a "bargain," and the vendor cordially agreed with her.

Milk costs from 15-18 cents (say 3½d. to 4½d.) a litre, or about 1 quart. Beef is 30 cents (7d.) a lb., pork 35 cents (8¼d.), mutton 30 cents, veal 30 cents, and bacon and lard 40 cents (9½d.) a lb.; Mexican flour is 7 cents a lb., and as the duty on American wheat was last year increased from 1½ to 3 cents a kilo (about 2½ lbs.), little but Mexican flour is now purchased. Sugar of native manufacture is 11 cents a lb., and all American groceries, of which an immense amount is disposed of annually, are from 50 per cent. to 100 per cent. dearer than in the United States.

All medicines and patent drugs are very expensive, the duties being exceptionally heavy and the chemists' profits enormous. Thus, Eno's Fruit Salt, which costs 2s. 3d. in England, costs 4s. 6d. in Mexico, while Cockle's pills, 10½d. size, are charged for here 75 cents = 1s. 6d. All foreign mineral waters are from 50 per cent. to 75 per cent. higher than the selling price at home, while foreign soaps, powders, perfumes, etc., etc., are priced at similar advances on ordinary prices. French perfumery and soap manufactures have a very considerable sale in Mexico; of British goods of this description one sees but little.

The victualling of Mexico City has of late become quite a proposition, but so complete are the arrangements generally, any breakdown in the order of things is seldom encountered. Whereas formerly every particle of produce had to come into the City on donkey- or mule-back, now the railways bring in practically everything which is perishable. Every incoming train bears at least one and often as many as five express provision cars, laden with vegetables, fruits, milk, and dead meat. Still



PORT OF TOPOLORAMPO: WESTERN TERMINUS, KANSAS CITY, MEXICO AND THE ORIENT RAILWAY.—see p. 273.



SURF BATHING AT CUYUTLÁN (STATE OF COLIMA.)

a good traffic is done on the old and picturesque Viga canal, which is, in the early mornings, quite busy with craft laden with vegetables of every description, grown outside the City, and with fruits from a long distance-off. The milk supplied to the City is, on the whole, pure and good, although many new-comers are warned against lurking fever-germs and the irrepressible microbes. Personally, although a daily and greedy consumer of milk, purchased in the City and out of it, I never found anything deleterious or detrimental to health from drinking it. Large dairy-farms are located just outside the City boundaries, and these also supply a good deal of butter, other consignments coming from the United States. Poultry, always purveyed alive and literally "kicking," is sent in huge quantities from the neighbourhood of Querétaro or nearer points. Beef-cattle principally comes in alive, and is slaughtered at the abattoirs within the City boundaries, and from these is distributed to the various retail markets. Most of the provisions for City consumption are consigned in the first place to the "middleman," and distributed by him to the small and large retail dealers. The railroads of Mexico have rendered possible the feeding of the City with considerable ease, and the system of distribution and collection is improving every day.