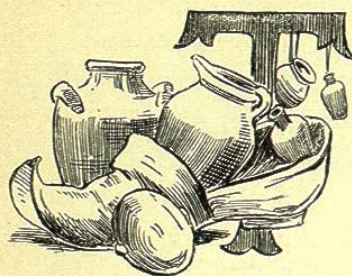


## CHAPTER II.

### IN MOTHER NOAH'S SHOES.\*



THE dearth of household furniture and conveniences already mentioned, put ingenuity and will force to their utmost tension, and I felt as if transported to antediluvian days. I have a candid conviction that Mother Noah never had cooking utensils more crude, or a larder more scant, than were mine. It may be, however, that the "old man" was "good to help around the house."

This was before the time of railways in Mexico, the "Nacional Mexicano" having only penetrated a few leagues west of the Rio Grande. With the primitive modes of transportation which served in lieu of the railway it was not advisable to attempt bringing household goods so far over a trackless country. The inconveniences that followed were not peculiar to ourselves, but common to all strangers, who like us could neither anticipate nor realize the scarcity of every household appurtenance.

The natives who enjoyed the luxury of furniture—and there was a large number who had everything in elegance—had also the romantic recollection, that great old two-wheeled carts, towering almost above the house-tops, had brought it from the capital, nearly a thousand miles, or it was manufactured by the carpenters of the town.

In the division of the apartments of the house, one half was allotted to us, while our friends distributed themselves among the remaining rooms, on the opposite side of the court-yard, the drawing-

\* In this, the two succeeding chapters, and wherever the common people are mentioned, the Spanish used is idiomatic, peculiar to the class it represents.

room being used in common. Mr. and Mrs. R— employed a cook and had their own *cuisine*, the others flitted about from *fonda* to *fonda* (restaurant) in search of sustenance. In the evening of each day we would meet and compare notes on the varied and amusing experiences of the day. However, I am not relating the adventures of our friends, but will generously leave that happy task to them.

Progress in furnishing our quarters in this great massive structure was slow indeed. How I longed for the delightful furnishings of my own home, which remained just as I had left it.

Fortunately for us, a druggist had two spare, pine single bedsteads, which he kindly sold to us for the sum of forty dollars. At an American factory they would have been worth about four dollars each. One was painted a bright red, the other an uncompromising orange. They were cot-like and had flat wire springs, while Mexican blankets constituted the entire bedding, mattresses and all. Pillows were improvised from bundles of wearing apparel. Fancy how they looked, the only furniture in a gorgeously frescoed room twenty-five by thirty-five feet, and of proportionate height!

Mr. and Mrs. R— were much less fortunate than ourselves in procuring their household comforts, or rather discomforts. They ordered two cots, which were covered with a gayly striped stuff. The brilliant dyes having impaired the strength of the material, at the first attempt to lie upon these treacherous beds, both individuals found themselves suddenly precipitated upon the stone floor. No one in the house had anything in the way of bedding to lend them, and in the darkness they betook themselves to the hotel, to occupy beds of iron, proof against collapse.

A friend lent us six hair-cloth chairs, and a table which had many years before been the operating table of his brother, a surgeon. It was long, green, and sagged in the middle. A carpenter was employed to make the remaining necessary articles of furniture. He labored on the customary *mañana* system, and while his calculations as to time ranged all the way from eight to fifteen days, I found he actually meant from six weeks to three months. He showed samples of his

workmanship, rocking-chairs with and without arms, made of pine, stained or painted or varnished, and upright chairs with cane seats. I ventured to ask when he could complete for us a dozen chairs, four rockers, and some tables. Utterly amazed, he looked at me with a smile of incredulity, as if to say, "What can you do with so much furniture?" He disapproved of my wish to have oblong and round tables, so I yielded acquiescence to the customary triangular ones which grace the corners of every parlor of respectability.

It now becomes necessary to introduce what proved to me the most peculiar and interesting feature of home-life in Mexico. This is not



KITCHEN NO. 1.

an article of furniture, a fresco, a pounded earthen floor, or a burro or barred casement, but the indispensable, all-pervading, and incomparable man-servant, known as the *mozo*. According to the prevailing idea, he is far more important than any of the things enumerated in my household ménage, for from first to last he played a conspicuous rôle.

Forewarned—forearmed! The respectability of the household depending on his presence; one was engaged, the strongest character in his line—the never-to-be-forgotten Pancho.

It was perhaps not a just sentence to pronounce upon this individual, but circumstances seemed to warrant the comparison I involuntarily made between our watchful Pancho and a sleepless bloodhound. At night he curled himself up on a simple *petate* with no pillow and only a blanket, and was as ready to respond to our beck and call as in the day.

In this house were two kitchens, representative of that part of the country. In the center of one was a miniature circus-ring about three feet in circumference, consisting simply of a raised circle of clay

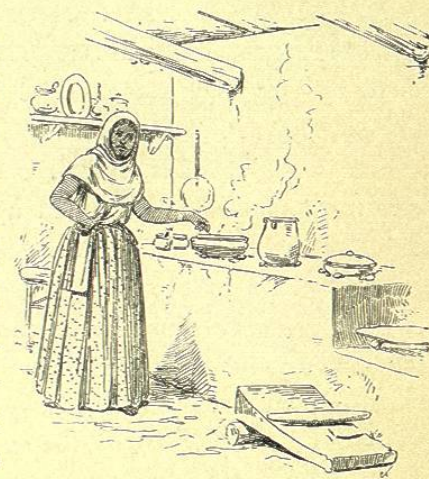
about one foot high. This constituted the range. Little fires were built within this ring, one under each of the pottery vessels used in the operations. After this uncomfortable fashion the cooking was done, the smoke circling about at its own sweet will and at length finding vent through a small door at one side, the only opening in the room.

The sole piece of furniture was a worm-eaten table supported on two legs, the inner side braced against the wall. Its decayed condition indicated that it was at least a hundred years old.

Mrs. R— amused herself by experimenting on the circus-ring—minus the aid of horses, however—a docile native woman executing what "ground and lofty tumbling" might be required in the culinary preparations.

The second kitchen contained another style of range equally primitive in its design.

Along the wall was built a solid breastwork of *adobe*, about two feet high, two feet deep, and extending the entire length of the room. An opening was left in the roof over this structure for the escape of smoke, but the grimy walls proved that it failed to answer its purpose. Upon this ledge, projection, or whatever it may be termed, the cook places her various pottery vessels with fires made of charcoal or small bits of wood under each, and there the stewing, boiling, frying, and crying go on all day. This cook, unlike the one in kitchen No. 1, stands up in the performance of her duties.



KITCHEN NO. 2.

When I inspected these kitchens, it may be imagined that the sight was rather depressing, coupled with the certainty that I could

effect no improvement. But we had the luxury of one tiny fire-place, to which in my despair I fled for refuge. In this little treasure our scheme of housekeeping was inaugurated with results both brave and gay.

Among the latter experiences I may class my first coffee-roasting, not realizing till then that the essential feature of a mill was lacking, and that I was at least five hundred miles from any possible purchase of one.

Pancho, however, was equal to the emergency, and, going off, soon returned with a *metate*. (See upon the floor of kitchen No. 2, a portrait of this important culinary utensil.)

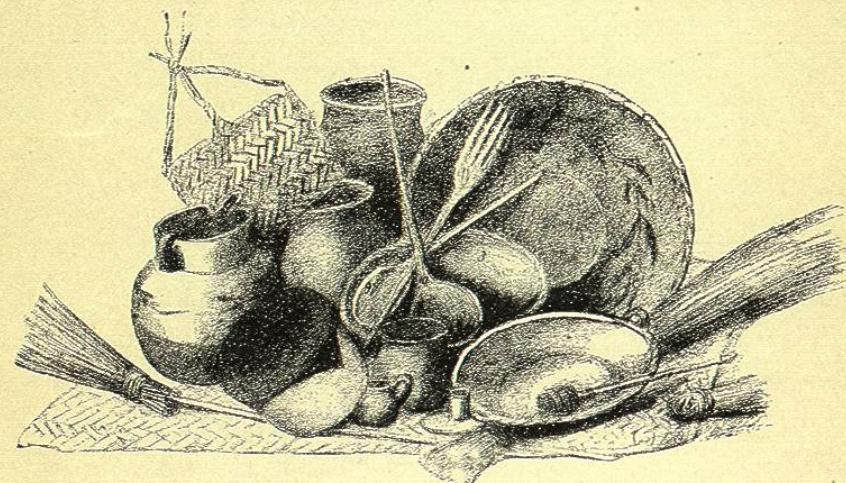
It was a decidedly primitive affair, and, like the mills of the gods, it ground slowly, but like them, it also ground to powder.

The *metate* is cut from a porous, volcanic rock, and is about eighteen inches long by a foot in width and eight inches in thickness. The upper surface, which is generally a little concave, is roughened with indentures; upon this the article is placed and beaten with another stone called a *mano*, resembling a rolling-pin. Almost every article of food is passed between these stones—meat, vegetables, corn, coffee, spices, chocolate—even the salt, after being washed and sun-dried, is crushed upon it. Such a luxury as "table salt" was not to be had. Previous to use these stones are hardened by being placed in the fire. The rough points become as firm as steel, and one *metate* will last through a generation.

This necessity of every-day life was a revelation to me. The color of an elephant, it was quite as unwieldy and graceless, but its importance in the homely details of the *ménage* was undeniable. It had but two competitors to divide the honors with—the maguey plant and the donkey. They were all three necessary to each other and to the commonwealth at large.

Equipped with an inconceivable amount of pottery of every shape and kind, maguey brushes, fans of plaited palm—the national bellows—wooden forks, spoons, and many other nameless primitive articles, my collection of household gods was complete.

The first meal cooked in that dainty little fire-place was more delicious than any that could be furnished at Delmonico's. In his quaint efforts to assist, Pancho perambulated around with an air as all-important as though he were *chef* of that famous *café*. But the climax of all was reached in Pancho's estimation when I put a pure white linen cloth on my green, historic table and arranged for the meal. He said over and over: "*Muy bonita cena!*" ("Very pretty supper"). But I discovered it was the attractions of my silver knives and forks



MY HOUSEHOLD GODS.

and other natty table ware from home that constituted the novelty. In his experience fingers were made before knives and forks.

I found my *major domo* knew everything and everybody; the name of every street, the price of every article to be bought or sold. My curiosity, I presume, only stimulated his imagination, and the more pleased I appeared at his recitals the more marvelous were his tales.

He gave the lineage of every family of the "*jente decente*," for generations, his unique style adding pith and point to his narrations. He told me the story of Hidalgo and Morelos and Iturbide; the coming of the Americans, the French Intervention, and all the late revolutions, until my head rang with the boom of cannon and the beat

of drum. But invariably these poetic narratives were rudely interrupted by some over-practical intrusion. In the same breath in which he completed the recital of the Emperor Iturbide, he suggested that wood was better and cheaper than charcoal for cooking.

With my approbation he went to the plaza, returning in a little while with a man who brought ten donkeys, all laden with wood packed on like saddle-bags. I asked the wood-vender to drive his vicious-looking dog out, when he complied by saying: "*Hist! hist! Sal!*" Of course I then thought the dog's name was *Sal*, but soon found the word meant "get out!" As the dog howled on being railed at, the man of importance again yelled at him, "*Callate! callate el ocico, cuele!*" ("Shut up—shut your mouth, and get out!")

Constant surprises were developed before my eyes every hour in the day. The yolks of the first eggs I bought were white—indeed, this was often the case,—which for a moment dazed me, as I had never expected to find my old friend, the hen, so different in her habits from her sisters in the States. But the qualities of the egg were identical with those familiar to me; however, yielding to prejudice, I rejoiced that eggs were not numbered among my favorite edibles.

The difficulties of all strangers not familiar with the language and idioms of the country were a part of my daily experience. Pancho was by that time master of the situation, and although evidently often amused, his thoughtfulness in relieving me of all embarrassment never failed. Though grave, he had a sense of humor. This was made evident, on one occasion, when I had been using a hot flat-iron. Having finished, I told Pancho to put it in the *cocinera*, meaning the kitchen. I heard a low chattering and smothered laughter between him and the cook. Pancho then returned to my room, and half quizzically, half serio-comically said: "Please come to the kitchen." I went, when he placed himself in front of the cook, with his left hand on her shoulder, waved his right arm around the room and said: "Señora, look; this is the *cocinera*"—(cook)—"and this," again waving the right hand around the room, "is the *cocina!* Do you want

me to put the *plancha caliente* (hot iron) in the cook, or in the kitchen?" Then with the forefinger of his right hand moving hastily before his nose, and a waggish smile on his face, the pantomime closed with, "*No usamos asi*" ("We don't use them this way").

Another ridiculous mistake I made when I wanted Pancho to buy me some cake, and told him to get four *gâteaux*, forgetting that *biscocho* and not *gateau* was the Spanish for cake. Folding his arms, he quietly answered without a smile, if he might presume to ask the Señora what she wanted with *cuatro gatos*—(four cats!) As the house was already overrun with these animals that had flocked in from all quarters, Pancho naturally wondered why I wanted to add to my feline tenants.

Itinerant venders of every imaginable commodity were constantly passing, and nothing pleased me better than to hold conversations with them, which they too evidently enjoyed.

Soon after the episode of the flat-iron, I heard the long drawn intonation of a vender and paid little heed to him, supposing he was running off a list of his stock in trade, such as pins, needles, tape, thread and other things too numerous to mention. Wanting none of these, I replied:

"*Tenemos bastante adentro*" ("We have plenty in the house").

A roar of laughter near by, and a familiar voice interpreted the man's question humorously enough; he was only asking if I wanted a *chichi* (wet nurse).

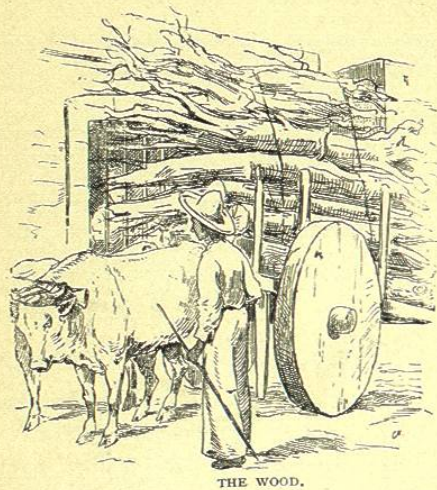
The common people of all ages were always bringing me *regalitos* (tokens of good will), and these were of every conceivable variety. A little girl whom I had often fed through the window, came into the house with her *rebozo* drawn closely about her, saying she had a *regalito* for me. I supposed it to be fruit or flowers, and so motioned to her to put it on the table in the dining-room.

In a moment she was at my side, saying:

"*No quedarse alli*" ("It will not stay there"), and going out I found a young chicken running around.

To pay fifty cents for every donkey load of wood, as I had done,

seemed preposterous; and, as Pancho knew everything, I asked him to suggest some more economical system of purchase. He recommended watching for the *carretas* at five o'clock in the morning.



THE WOOD.

Promptly at the hour indicated, I was before the barred window, when I heard the awful screech, thump, bump, and rumble of the lumbering *carretas*. About a dozen in a line, they advanced slowly—their great old wooden wheels wabbling from side to side—drawn by oxen with raw-hide trappings; their sturdy drivers sandal-footed and clothed in cotton cloth, with an iron-tipped goad in hand, punching and pushing the beasts at every step. Here was the wood—the entire tree, roots and all—ghosts of the forest hauled twenty-five miles, rolling down the street on an antiquated vehicle. In response to Pancho's hand-clap, the manager of the caravan demanded fifteen dollars a load, the dollars being the only part of the transaction that belonged to our age. But the wood was duly bought.

Pancho had so far held the reins as to all household purchases, but in accordance with my ideas of independence and careful management, I announced that I was going to market. He kindly told me it was not customary for ladies to go to market—"the *mozo* did that"—throwing in so many other arguments, also of a traditional nature, that I was somewhat awed by them, though not deterred. Having been accustomed to superintend personally all domestic duties, to be bolted and barred up in a house, without recreation and outdoor exercise, induced an insupportable sense of oppression.

Walking leisurely along the street, absorbed in thought, with Pancho near at hand carrying a basket, I was attracted by the sound of voices and the tramp of feet. Glancing backward, I saw a motley

procession of idlers of the lower classes following, which increased at every corner, reminding me of good old circus days, though without the blare of brass instruments, the small boys bringing up the rear. The very unusual occurrence of a lady going to market had excited their curiosity.

The market was a large, pavilion-like building, occupying the center of a spacious plaza. Little tables and bits of straw matting were distributed on all sides; and upon these the trades-people, chiefly women, displayed their wares, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and other commodities.



TAKING THEIR MEALS IN THE MARKET.

On seeing me, every vender began shouting the prices and names of articles, entreating the *señora estrangera* to buy. But the strange medley, together with their earnestness, took my breath away, and I could only stand and watch the crowd. In the fantastic scene before me, it would be impossible to tell which of the many unaccustomed features took precedence of the others in point of novelty.

Notwithstanding the crowd, there was no disorder, no loud laughter or unseemly conduct. The courteous meetings between acquaintances, the quiet hand-shakings, the tender inquiry as to the health of each other, the many forms of polite greeting, were strangely at variance with their dilapidated and tattered condition, their soiled garments, half-faded blankets, and time-stained sombreros.

Whole families seemed to have their abiding places in the market. Babies! babies! everywhere; under the tables, on mats, hanging on their mothers' backs, cuddled up in heaps among the beets, turnips, and lettuces, peeping over pumpkins larger than they; rollicking, crying, crowing, and laughing, their dancing black eyes the only clean, clear spots about them—with and without clothes—until my head and the air were vocalizing the old-time ditty of "One little, two little, three little Injuns." But instead of stopping at "ten," they bade fair to run up into the thousands.

Parrots were there by the dozen. On seeing me, some began screaming and calling in idiomatic Spanish: "Look at the señora estrangera! look! look! Señorita, tell me your name!" The rest joined in chorus, and soon an interested crowd surrounded me. They kept close at my heels, inspecting every article I bought, even commenting on my dress, the women lightly stroking it and asking me a thousand questions as to where I came from, how I liked their country, and if I was not afraid of the Mexicans, and invariably closing by saying, "She is far from her home. It is sad for her here."

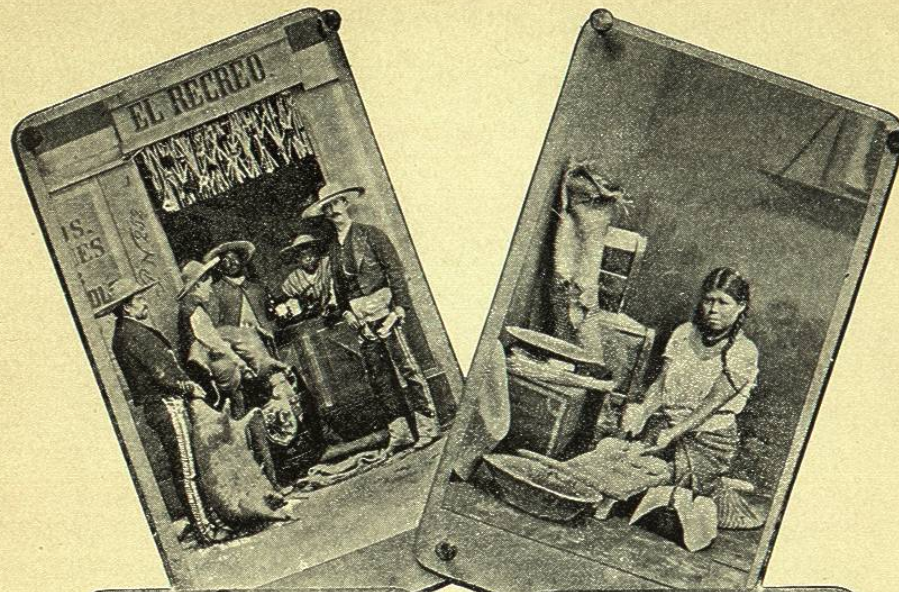


SELLING THEIR LITTLE STOCKINGS AND SHOES.

Here and there the amusing spectacle presented itself of men intently engaged in the occupation among us assigned to women, that of knitting and crocheting baby hoods and stockings of bright wool, and of the funniest shapes I ever beheld!

Vegetables, fruits, and nuts of all kinds were counted out carefully in little heaps, and could only be bought in that way, by retail, wholesale rates being universally rejected. I could buy as many of these piles as I wanted, but each one was counted separately, and paid for in

the same way. I offered to buy out the entire outfit of a woman



PULQUE SHOP.  
SELLING FLOUR.



PATING TORTILLAS.  
NEWS-BOYS.