CHAPTER III.

"NO ES COSTUMBRE." *

WE were overshadowed by the dome of a magnificent cathedral, the exterior of which was embellished with life-sized statues of saints. The interior presented a costly display of tinted walls, jeweled and bedecked images, and gilded altars. Its mammoth tower had loomed grimly under the suns and stars of a hundred years, and the solidity of its perfect masonry has so far defied the encroachments of time.

The city of our adoption boasted an Alameda, where the air was redolent of the odor of the rose and violet, and made musical with the tinkling of fountains; and where could be seen the "beauty and chivalry" of a civilization three centuries old, taking the evening air.

Plazas beautified with flowers, shrubs, and trees, upon which neither money nor pains had been spared, lent a further charm. Stores were at hand wherein could be purchased fabrics of costly texture, as well as rare jewels—in fact, a fair share of the elegant superfluities of life; and yet in the midst of so much civilization, so much art, so much luxury of a certain kind, so much wealth, I found to my dismay, upon investigation, that I was at least fifty miles from an available broom!

Imagine the dilemma, you famously neat housekeepers of the United States! A house with floors of pounded dirt, tile, brick, and cement, and no broom to be had for money, though, I am pleased to

* The higher classes use the term "Eso no se acostumbra;" while the idiom of the common people abbreviates the expression into "No es costumbre."

add, one was finally obtained for love. My generous little Mexican neighbor and friend, Pomposita, taking pity on my despair, gave me one—which enabled me to return the half-worn borrowed broom of another friend.

Owing to the exorbitant demands of the custom-house, such humble though necessary articles were not then imported; and the untutored sons of La Republica manufactured them on haciendas, from materials crude beyond imagination.

Once or twice a year long strings of *burros* may be seen, wending their way solemnly through the streets; girt about with a burden of the most wonderful brooms.

These brooms were of two varieties; one had handles * as knotty and unwieldy as the thorny *mesquite*, while the other was still more primitive in design, and looked like old field Virginia sedge grass tied up in bundles. They were retailed by men who carried them through the streets on their backs.

For the rude character of their brooms, however, the manufacturers are not to blame, but the sterility of the country, and the failure of nature to provide suitable vegetable growths.

"WILL YOU BUY A BROOM?"

Every housekeeper takes advantage of the advent of the *escobero* (broom-maker), to lay in a stock of brooms sufficient to last until his next visit. It was two months before an opportunity of buying a broom, even from a "wandering Bavarian," was afforded me, and during that time I came to regard Doña Pomposita's gift as the apple of my eye.

"*Mer-ca-ran las es-co-bas!*" One morning a new sound assailed my ears, as it came up the street, gathering force and volume the nearer it approached. I heard it over and over without divining its meaning. But at last a man en-

* See picture of "Household gods," for the brooms with handles.

tered our portal and in a tone that made my hair stand on end and with a vim that almost shook the house, he screamed—"*Es-co-bas, Señ-o-ra!*' —drawling each word out as long as a broom-handle, then rolling it into a low hum, which finally died into a whispered—"Will you buy some brooms?" Had he known my disposition and special fondness for broom-handles—without reference to my household need—he would have brought them to me directly, dispensing with his ear-splitting medley—to a woman for three months without a broom!

On ascertaining that the *escobero* would not visit the city again for some time, I bought his entire stock, and laid them up with prudent foresight, against the possibility of another broom famine.

With a genuine American spirit, I concluded to have a general house-cleaning, and, equipped with these wonderful brooms, with Pancho's assistance the work began. The first place demanding attention was the immense parlor, with its floor of solid cement. Pancho began to sweep, but the more he swept, the worse it looked—ringed, streaked, and striped with dust. I thought he was not using his best efforts, so with a will, I took the broom and made several vigorous strokes, but to my amazement, it looked worse than ever. In my despair a friend came in, who comprehended the situation at a glance, and explained that floors of that kind could not be cleaned with a broom; that *amoli*—the root of the *ixtli* (eastly)—soap-root—applied with a wet cloth, was the medium of renovation.

The *amoli* was first macerated and soaked for some time in water. A portion of the liquid was taken in one vessel and clear water in another. The cleansing was done in small squares, the rubbing all in one direction. The effect was magical—my dingy floor being restored to its original rich Indian red.

Now and then, while on his knees, rubbing away with might and main, Pancho would throw his eyes up at me with a peculiar expression of despair, while he muttered in undertone: "*No es costumbre de los mozos lavar los suelos*" ("It is not customary for mozos to wash floors").

Insatiable curiosity is the birthright of the poor of Mexico, and on this remarkable day they gathered about the windows until not another one could find room—talking to Pancho, who looked as if already under sentence for an infraction of the criminal code. They made strange motions with their fingers, exclaiming at the same time: "*Es una verguenza el mozo hacer tales cosas!*" ("It is a shame for a mozo to do such things!") Others replied by saying: "*Es un insulto!*" ("It is an insult!"), while others took up the argument of the case by saying: "*Por supuesto que si*" ("Why, of course it is"). But all this did not cause Pancho to give me a rude look or an impertinent word.

The floor now looked red and shiny, the windows were clear and glistening, and the six hair-cloth chairs stood grimly along the wall, in deference to the custom. My little friend took her departure, and Pancho moved lamely about, as if stiffened by his arduous labor.

In all my housekeeping experiences nothing ever occurred which for novelty was comparable to the events of that morning. I felt sure that when Mother Noah descended from Mount Ararat, and assumed the responsibilities of housekeeping—or more properly tent-keeping—on the damp plain, however embarrassing the limitation of her equipments may have been, she was at least spared the provocation of a scornful and wondering audience, greeting her efforts on every side with that now unendurable remark, "*No es costumbre.*"

I afterward learned the cause of the commotion, when it transpired that such services as floor-cleaning are performed, not by the *mozo*, but by a servant hired for the occasion, outside the household.

In a few moments my *lavandera*—washerwoman—entered, accompanied by her two pretty, shy little girls. Having complimented the fresh appearance of the house,—Pancho now and then explaining what he had done,—she informed me that the following day would be the *dia de santo*—saint's day—of one of her bright-eyed *chiquitas*, and "*hay costumbre*" ("there is a custom") of receiving tokens on these days from interested friends. Acting upon this hint, I went to my bedroom, followed by Juana and the *niñas*, who displayed great surprise at every step. My red and yellow covered beds they tapped

and talked to as if they had been animate things, calling them, "*camas bonitas, coloradas y amarillas!*" ("pretty beds, red and yellow!")

I turned the bright blankets over, that they might see the springs, and the sight utterly overcame them. Their astonishment at the revelation of such mysterious and luxurious appendages made them regard me with mingled awe, astonishment, and suspicion. The mother struck the springs with her fists, and as the sound rang out and vibrated, the children retreated hastily, shaking with alarm.

Wishing to conform to the customs, and remembering Juana's hint, I unlocked my "Saratoga." The *chiquitas* stood aside, fearing, I suppose, that from the trunk some frightful apparition might spring forth. When the lid went back they exclaimed: "*Valgame Dios!*" ("Help me, God"), and crossed themselves hastily, as if to be prepared for the worst. I invited them to come near, at the same time opening a compartment filled with bright flowers and ribbons.

This was a magnet they could not resist, and overcoming their fears, they came and stood close to the trunk, now and then touching the pretty things I exhibited to their wondering eyes. I gave each of them a gay ribbon, and while they were talking delightedly and caressing the pretty trifles, by some mischance the fastening of the upper tray lost its hold. Down it came with a crash—being still heavily packed—and away went the children, screaming and crying, one taking one direction, the other another.

We went in pursuit of them, and when found, one was crouching down in the court-yard under a rose-bush, while the other stood in terror behind the heavy parlor door. Both were shaking, their teeth chattering, while they muttered something about "*el diablo! el diablo!*"

By this time I understood the line which people of this class in Mexico unflinchingly draw between their own humble station and mine, yet I felt moved to treat the frightened children with the same hospitality which in my own land would have proved soothing under similar circumstances. Acting upon this inspiration, I went quickly and brought a basin of water to wash their tear-stained faces.

To my utter surprise, they exclaimed in the same breath: "*No lo permito!*" ("We cannot permit it!")

"*No es costumbre.*"

"NO ES COSTUMBRE."

The mother approached me with an expression of deep concern and seriousness in her eyes, and with her forefinger raised in gentle admonition. Looking me earnestly in the face, she began moving her finger slowly from side to side directly before my eyes, saying: "*Oiga, Señorita, sepa V. que en esta tierra, cuando nosotros los Mexicanos*" (referring of course to her own class) "*tenemos el catarro*" (emphasizing the last word on G sharp), "*nunca nos lavamos las caras*" ("Listen to me, my good lady, in this country, when we have the catarrh (meaning a bad cold), we never put water on our faces").

"Why not?" I asked.

"*Porque no estamos acostumbradas, y por el clima, sale más mala la enfermedad*" ("Because we are not accustomed to it, and on account of the climate, the sickness is made worse").

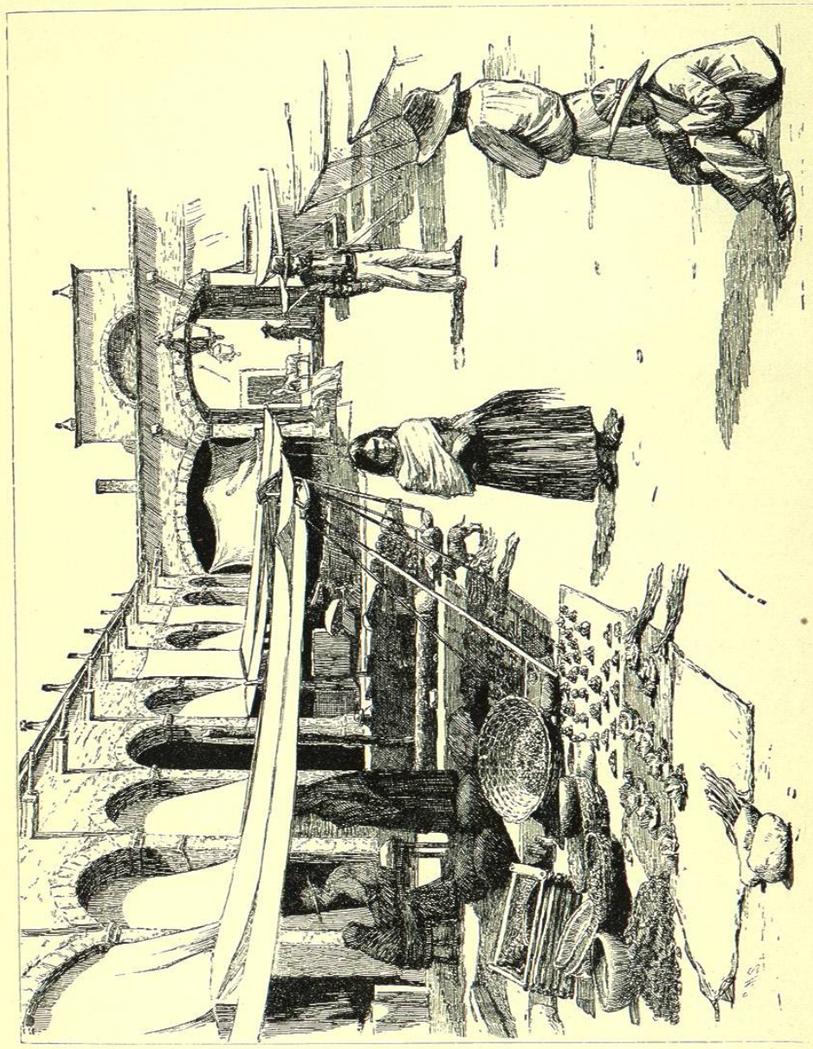
Thus ended the dialogue. But the children did not hold me responsible for their fright, and badè me a kindly *adios*, promising to return again, a promise fulfilled every week, but on no account would they ever venture near *that* trunk again.

Pancho was determined to give to us and our belongings, as far as possible, the exterior appearance of the "*costumbres.*" On entering my room after a little absence, one day, I found him straining every nerve and panting for breath. He had made a low bench, and was trying to place my Saratoga on it, but his strength was not equal to the task. The explanation came voluntarily that, on account of the

animalitos, it was customary for families to keep trunks on benches or tables. I soon found the *animalitos* had reference to the various bugs and scorpions which infest the houses, and all trunks were really kept as Pancho said.

As time passed, Pancho constituted himself our instructor and guide in every matter possible, including both diet and health. He warned us against the evil effects of walking out in the sun after ten o'clock in the morning, and especially enjoined upon us not to drink water or wash our faces on returning, as catarrh and headache would be sure to follow. Supposing this only the superstition of an ignorant servant, I took a special delight in taking just such walks, and violating these rules, but every time I paid the forfeit in a cold and headache, according to prediction. I was now satisfied that Pancho was not only wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove, blest with a keen eye of discrimination, but also a first-class health officer, and in the movement of his forefinger lay tomes of reason and good sense. But I had soon to discover that he would have no infringement of his privileges; and, come what would, he was determined to have his *pilon* in the market.

The servants who came and went often warned me that under no consideration must I go to market, but this was one of my home customs, and I could see no reason for its discontinuance. The system of giving the *pilon* (fee) to the servants, by merchants and market-people, as I already knew, would be a stumbling-block in my way. I had discussed in Pancho's presence my determination to go regularly, when I fancied I saw a strange light come into his eyes, which soon explained itself. He came humbly before me, in a short time, hat in hand, his face bearing the sorrowful, woe-begone look of one in the depths of an overwhelming calamity, saying, that a cart had run over his grandmother, and he would have to leave. He had been so kind and considerate in every way—never tiring of any task he had to perform—and so faithful, that I would prove my sympathy and good will to him by an extra sum—outside his wages—which might be a blessing, and aid in restoring his aged grandmother. He



A TYPICAL MARKET SCENE.

walked off, as if distressed beyond measure, at the same time assuring me that he would send his *comadrita* (little godmother of his children) and her husband, who would serve me well.

They came, but it was unfortunate for Pancho. The woman was an inveterate talker, and soon informed me that she was not the *comadrita* of his children; nor had a cart run over his grandmother; in fact, he had none, as she had died before Pancho was born. This was a new phase of the subject, but I was not long in solving the enigma. He had been goaded long enough by my American methods; he had become the butt of ridicule from his friends, and now he would assert himself.

However well he was treated in our house, to be called upon to surrender the most precious boon of all his "*costumbres*"—the market fees—never! But to wound my feelings in leaving was far from his wishes, so he shrewdly planned and carried out the tragic story of the mishap to his grandmother.

The *comadrita* introduced herself with chastened dignity as Jesusita Lopez; but with head loftily erect, and an air of much consequence, informed me that the name of her *marido*—(husband)—was Don Juan Bautista (John the Baptist), *servidores de V.*—("your obedient servants").

She smiled at every word, a way she had of assuring me of her delight in being allowed to serve me, but at the same time, glanced ominously at the cooking-stove. The smile lengthened into a broad grin when Don Juan Bautista came in sight; in her eyes he was "kingdoms, principalities, and powers." Together they examined the stove—talking in undertone—stooping low and scrutinizing every compartment. At last Don Juan Bautista arose, and turning to me said, "Jesusita cannot cook on this *máquina Americana*" (American machine).

"Why?" I asked. He straightened himself up to the highest point, half on tip toe, at the same time nodding his head, and pointing his forefinger at Jesusita, emphatically replied:

"Because it will give her disease of the liver—*como siempre*—as always, with the servants here."