

CHAPTER VII.

THE MEXICANS IN THEIR HOMES.



IF the Mexicans Brantz Mayer wrote as follows: "I have found them kind, gentle, hospitable, intelligent, benevolent, and brave. . . . In fact, regard them in any way, and they will be found to possess the elements of a fine people, who want but peace and the stimulus of foreign emulation to bring them forward among the nations of the earth with great distinction. . . . There are of course in Mexico, as in all countries, specimens of egotism, selfishness, haughtiness, ill-breeding and loose morals, both among the men and the women; but, although we find these floating, like bubbles, on the top of society, they must not therefore be considered the characteristics of the country. . . . With domestic virtue, genius, and patriotism, no people need despair; and it should be the prayer of every republican that enough of these still remain in Mexico to reconstruct their government and society."

In speaking of their politeness, Mayer continues: "The 'old school' seems to have taken refuge among the Mexicans. They are formally, and, I think, substantially, the politest people I have met with. The respect for age, the sincerity of friendship, the results of reading and education, and the honest, unpretending *naturalness* of

character, for which, over all other people I have ever met, I think the best of them are remarkable." . . . "The fine benevolence of ancient friendship, the universal respect for genius, a competent knowledge of the laws and institutions of other countries, a perfect acquaintance with the cause of Mexican decadence, and a charming regard for all those domestic rites which cement the affections of a home circle may all be observed and admired within the walls of a Mexican dwelling."

* Brantz Mayer, above all other writers, not even excepting Madame Calderon de la Barca, has observed more closely and written more sympathetically and faithfully of Mexican characteristics. In dealing with this subject, it will be understood that reference is had only to the higher and more cultured classes of society.

During the more than forty years intervening since this distinguished writer gave expression to these views, ten years only of which have brought to Mexico the precious boon of peace, the changes occurring and the onward march of events in that country have proved the correctness of his assertions. With every possible distracting cause, calculated to foster and encourage ignoble traits and retrograde ideas, they have not only continued brave and patriotic, but their social and domestic institutions have remained sacredly intact. Let the unsympathizing comment as they may upon the hapless fate of poor Mexico, it is not to be gainsaid that perhaps no country in the world has politically presented a more desolate picture, nor yet one that speaks a nobler lesson.

But by sympathetic intuition a woman attributes to the women of Mexico that undercurrent of social and domestic regeneration which has purified and preserved her institutions. While the men have been engrossed in war and revolution, with their train of direful results, the women, in the seclusion of their homes, have kept an ever-

* *Mexico as it Was and as it Is*, by Mayer, and *Madame Barca's Life in Mexico*, were published about the same time, the former in 1844, Madame B.'s in 1843. Mayer was Secretary of the American Legation under the Hon. Powhatan Ellis, and the latter was the wife of the first Spanish Minister who was sent to Mexico after the War of Independence.

faithful watch over the domestic virtues, and the happiness and welfare of those whom God has given them.

In repose, there is in the eye of every Mexican an expression of deep sadness which is hardly accounted for by recent history, however tragic, and must have been transmitted to the race through the miseries of martial conquests.

It has occurred to me that the women have inherited a larger portion of this constitutional melancholy than the men. I have been more convinced of it on meeting and conversing with them in their own homes. When the death of a member of the family was referred to, which had taken place years before—perhaps a son or a husband killed in battle—the grief seemed as deep and uncontrollable as if it had happened on that day. They are all patriotic, and if the country suffers, it is a part of themselves, and is reflected in their lives.

The Mexicans are by nature close observers of physiognomy, and, though shy, are sharp critics of the bearing of strangers. Their extreme isolation has probably added to the natural impulse. It does not follow that they criticise adversely; but they weigh one's lightest syllable in their own balances. Upon their first coming in contact with a stranger, they expect him to look them clearly in the face; and be sure they are watching every movement and expression with the keenest suspicion. Whatever may be their own failings, they are wonderfully endowed with the power to "fix you with the eye;" and you are expected to meet it bravely, and not to quail under the penetrating glance. To an infinite degree are the women expert in reading character, probably more so than our own more world-experienced and educated countrywomen.

It is no matter of surprise that they are distrustful of strangers, when the most they have known of them has been in the way of armed forces seeking to crush out their national existence. Their hospitality, too, having so often met with unwarrantable criticism personally and in the press, they cannot be expected to welcome the stranger over their threshold without caution and misgiving.

A kindly and sympathetic warmth is always heartily reciprocated, while coldness at once repels. To desire their friendship is to deserve it, especially if the wish be tempered by the observance of the golden rule. No people are better aware of their national, political, and social defects, but, being sensitive, nervous, and very proud, an adverse criticism from the thoughtless and ungenerous stranger naturally wounds, and induces that reserve which is so largely national, and which it is so difficult to overcome. When a disposition is manifested to meet them on equal terms of friendly good-will, and proper deference is shown to their customs, it will be found that no people are more delightful, socially, more faithful as friends, or more ready to serve the stranger from whatever land, than the Mexicans.

Hospitality is one of the national characteristics, but it is of a nature peculiar to itself, and, contrary to our customs, the latch-string hangs on the inside, for the court circles of Europe are not more exclusive than the higher classes of society in Mexico. The architecture of the houses—their barred windows and well-guarded doors, which prevent intrusion from prying curiosity—together with the climate and customs, conspire to incline the people to lead exclusive lives. It is manifested even in the choice of vehicles, closed carriage being almost invariably used, though with such air and skies the reverse might naturally be expected. The first aspiration, with them, is to make home beautiful, and to this end every element of a cultured and refined taste is duly provided and cared for within the massive doors. The exquisite beauty of the rare and gorgeous flowers in the *patios* affords constant pleasure by day, while by night they have only to glance upward to obtain wondrous visions of a star-gemmed firmament.

Letters of introduction, even, will not always secure access to the inner circle of the home life. Comparatively speaking, few are accorded this privilege. But when once admitted by personal friends, especially if accompanied by them on the first visit, all formality and reserve are at an end, and the most gracious attentions are freely be-

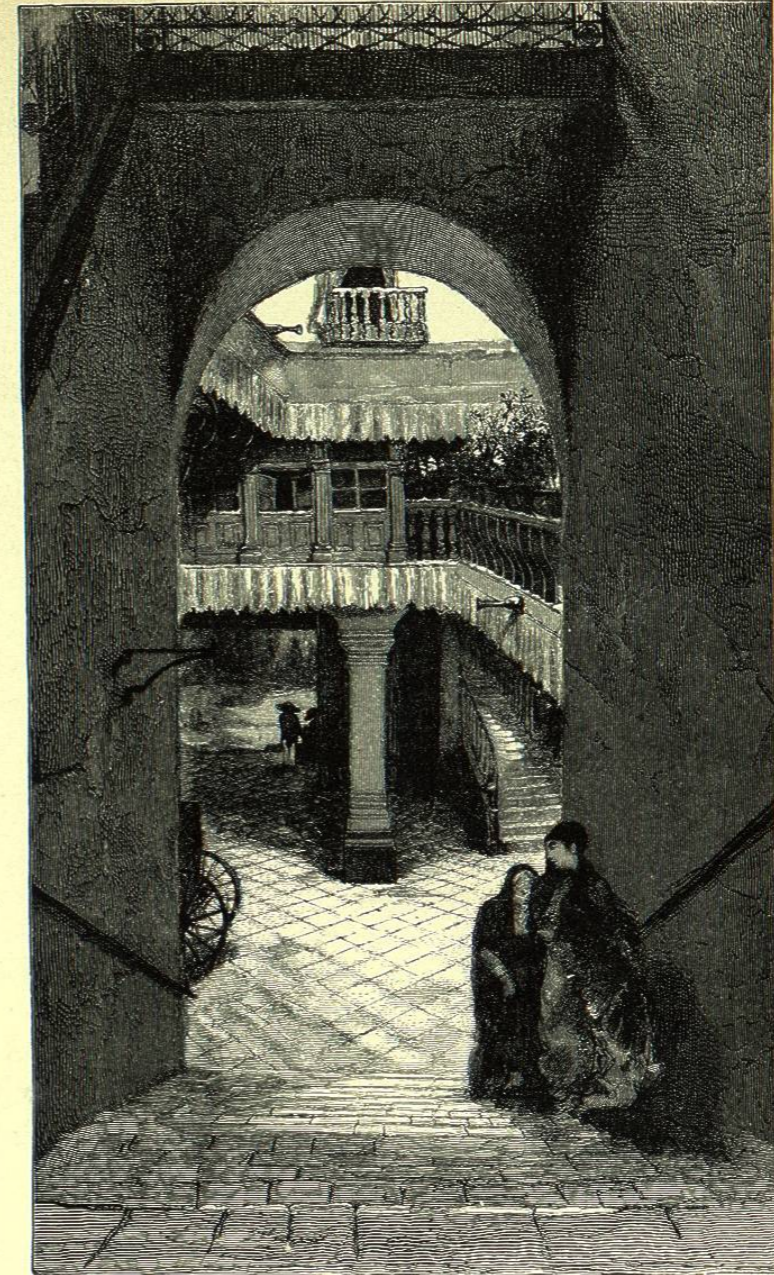
stowed, the veriest stranger feeling that he is no longer such. A genuine glow of pleasure has often been mine on finding that their inborn distrust of foreigners had melted away in my first intercourse with them. On passing many handsome houses in the large cities, and halting to admire the beauty and luxuriance of the flowers in the court, on seeing me the gentle voice of the *dueña de la casa* (lady of the house) would bid me enter and inspect them to my satisfaction. When this was done, and my hands filled with flowers, I was invited to the *sala*, chocolate ordered, and on departing—certain we would never meet again—a warm embrace, a cordial shake of the hand, and a "*Vaya V. con Dios!*" ("God be with you"), heartily given.

They are endowed by nature with a highly nervous and sensitive organization, with jealousy for a birthright; and amongst intimate friends of their own nationality they are easily offended, but less so with foreigners. And I have observed that the higher the altitude the more evident are these tendencies, attributable, probably, to both climate and elevation.

Much as the Mexicans love their homes, their language contains no word expressive of the meaning of the word "home." They have only *casa* (house), and *hogar*, but little used and lacking euphony. Another fact—the absence of chimneys, depriving them of the pleasures of the fireside, renders it only natural that they should seek diversion outside. The balmy air invites them to life *al fresco*, consequently the morning promenade, which usually includes the mass at church, the afternoon drive, and perhaps the theater at night, constitute their chief sources of outdoor recreation and amusement.

No people more eminently possess the faculty of entertaining their friends in a royally hospitable way. An assemblage of five hundred guests is as well taken care of as fifty, and no one feels neglected. They are convivial and joyous, mingling freely with one and all; gay sallies of wit and sparkling repartee rule the hour. But, at the same time, a remarkable dignity characterizes their every movement.

In the majority of the towns and cities the ringing of the cathedral bells, at ten o'clock, calls the people from their places of recrea-



ENTRANCE TO A MEXICAN HOME.

tion to their homes, and the streets become as quiet and silent as the *campo santo* (grave-yard).

In all their professions of friendship, I have found them frank and sincere, and untiring in their demonstrations to the favored person who has won their regard. While this sincerity is unquestionable, they are yet gifted in a high degree with the pretty art of evasion. Let one who has had trouble confide in them, and let them be but fully convinced that they are the trusted custodians of such confidence, and nothing can induce them to betray the trust so reposed. The penalty of severest punishment cannot wring from them a secret intrusted to them. But by the dainty manipulation of their admirable tact and diplomacy, the inquirer is satisfied and not one syllable betrayed. As well try to make an incision in the side of Popocatepetl with a penknife as extract from a Mexican what he does not want to tell you.

It is asserted by some writers that there is no middle class. It is my opinion, founded upon careful observation and inquiry, that there is not only at this time a very large and influential middle class, but that every year it gains large accessions from the humbler class, who are making giant strides to a nobler place in life through the fine educational advantages now afforded them. In this connection I must say that, while access to the higher strata of society is difficult, the middle class vie with them in their hospitality, never turning a stranger from their doors, and some of the most delightful acts of courtesy and kindness that I ever met with in that country have been extended me by the ever faithful and gentle middle class. With them letters of introduction are unnecessary.

They may not own their homes, but there is an air of pretty neatness about their houses; an unobstructed freedom, a gentleness of manner, which I say unqualifiedly is not equaled anywhere. It is from this class that are springing up every year men of genius and talent, of unremitting toil and study, which will enable them to take that honored station in their chosen field of labor which, in all countries, is the reward of untiring patience and fidelity to any cause.

The forms of greeting and salutation are numerous, and among them none is so distinctively national as the *abrazo*. Men fall into each other's arms and remain thus for several minutes, patting each other on the shoulder and indulging in all sorts of endearing epithets.

Another form, rather less diffuse, may be seen any time on the street and promenade, not only among men, but also between friends of opposite sex. In the quickest, most spirited manner, the arms of both parties are outstretched; they rush together for a second, their breasts barely touch, and while the observer is watching for a kiss to follow this ardent salute, they separate and the *abrazo* is finished. The extreme frankness accompanying it compels one to rather admire the custom; for it means no more than hand-shaking among Americans.

A mere introduction between men assumes elaborate proportions. Señor Calderon says: "I have the honor to present to you my friend, Señor Ojeda, a merchant of this city;" whereupon Señor Ojeda replies: "Your obedient servant. Your house (meaning his own) is in — Street, where I am at your orders for all that you may wish;" or, "My house is *muy a su disposicion*" ("entirely at your disposal; make yourself at home").

From this profusion of politeness, doubtless, has arisen the impression that the Mexicans are devoid of sincerity; when in truth the recipient of such offers would alone deceive himself should he suppose that the Mexican proposed to make him a gift of his house.

Hand-shaking goes to extremes. If friends meet twenty times a day, the ceremony must be gone through as often.

It is not sufficient for gentlemen merely to touch the hat-brim, in passing each other or any friend; but the hat is removed entirely from the head, whether driving, riding, or walking. I noticed a little pantomime they go through when one gives a light to another. He draws his right hand quickly to his breast, in a second extends it outward, tipping his hat-brim three times, which is all repeated by the one who has lighted his cigar.

I saw on Calle Plateros, one day, two splendid carriages each

occupied by one man. On seeing each other, the carriages were halted, both alighted, removed hats, shook hands, embraced, talked for a few moments, again embraced, shook hands, bowed, took off hats, and each entered his carriage and went his way.

Among women the salutation assumes a more confidential form; the stranger receives a gentle tap of the right hand upon the left shoulder, and then a generous shake of the hand; while more intimate friends not only tap each other, but also kiss, not on the lips, however, merely laying the cheeks softly together. The Mexican mode is to be commended.

A lady admires some ornament or article of wearing apparel; instantly the possessor gracefully informs her it is "*muy á su orden*" ("at your orders"). Changing residence requires that cards be sent announcing the fact, and placing it "*muy á su orden*," otherwise visiting ceases. Young babies are also placed "*muy á su orden*." In writing notes of invitation, the Mexican lady always closes with, "We will expect you here, at such an hour, at your house."

A vein of sentiment and poetry, however, runs through every detail of their lives, which forms the motive power of that fastidious nicety which regulates social intercourse. A spray of flowers sent as a token will be first pinned over the heart, the pin left in it, indicating the pledge as a part of the personality of the donor, hence more sacred; or a note may contain a pansy, with a dainty motto inscribed on its petals.

In letter writing or in making a formal acknowledgment, politeness and high-bred courtesy govern; even the President would make himself the individual under obligation.

No gifts are made at Christmas, but on "*El Año Nuevo*" ("The New Year") tokens of all sorts and kinds, and cards, are sent to friends, with "*felicitaciones*."

Visiting is the same as in all well-regulated society, except that strangers must send their cards and make the first call. A short visit is not appreciated, as it would indicate coldness and formality. Everything is given up to the guest, let the time be long or short,

and a Mexican lady never continues the performance of any duty, however urgent, or engages in anything that would distract her attention from her guests.

On entering a Mexican home, after an absence of months or years, if you are an old friend, the reception you meet with is overwhelmingly joyful. Every member of the household in turn gives you an embrace; you are seated on the right-hand end of the sofa, and then a thousand kind inquiries follow in regard to relatives, and many interchanges of thought and incidents that have occurred in your absence. You are allowed to do nothing for yourself, for the entire family, from the least to the greatest, perform a part in entertaining and making you feel at home.

But it is a difficult point in Mexican etiquette, that of seating visitors. Guest and host vie with each other in politeness, and sometimes several minutes are occupied in this courteous contest.

On leaving, the visitor is always entreated to remain longer, but when he must go, they "speed the parting guest" with all the fervor with which he is received.

Gentlemen bow first on the street, but ladies have the advantage in the house; for even if the President were to call, the lady of the house is not expected to rise from her seat to receive him.

In walking, ladies hold the right arm of the gentleman. The right-hand side of the back seat of a carriage, and the right-hand end of a sofa, are the places of honor reserved for the guest.

At balls introductions are not necessary for gentlemen to ask ladies to dance, and in private houses all are supposed to be ladies and gentlemen.

A lady retains her maiden name in marriage, and her visiting cards are engraved with her own name with the prefix of *de* before her husband's—as, Josefina Bros de Riva Palacio. Madame de Iturbide, as known in the United States and Europe, in Mexico is simply Alicia G. de Iturbide.

It is better for foreigners to have visiting cards engraved after the fashion of the country if they intend mingling with Mexican society.

Mexicans are as fastidious in the style and quality of paper and envelopes as in everything else; even the minutest detail is *de rigueur*. In high society, only the finest paper, with monogram in gold or silver, or elaborately engraved with the name inside the monogram, is selected. Some of the daintiest informal little notes I have seen, passed between lady friends—written on the finest paper, and then by deft fingers folded in the form of a leaf or flower, with the address on one tiny petal. In all correspondence the *rubrica* or *firma* must be used; neither the nature of what is written, nor the name, has any significance without the peculiar flourish beneath. This is taught in the schools, and the more elaborate the better. The *rubrica* is a receipt, a part of every business obligation or social correspondence. Every public document closes with "*Libertad y Independencia*," or "*Libertad en la Constitution*," and in sending an agent to a foreign country, every document relating to the business bears his photograph—perhaps a wise precaution.

In exchanging photographs, it is customary to dedicate them with a pretty sentiment or verse, and the date—not infrequently the age, also—is added.

Smoking publicly is not now customary with señoritas, but I have been told they indulge in this harmless and, with them, graceful pastime in private. Matrons smoke without reserve, and as a matter of course, men are habituated to the indulgence everywhere—no place in the house being exempt from the odor of the cigarette. Pipes are not used, and a delightful offset to smoking is that there is no chewing.

Many of their forms of daily and general politeness may seem empty and meaningless; but there is no more insincerity intended than in some of our own social small coin. It will be borne in mind also that these are not the characteristics of cities or city people, but belong equally to smaller towns and villages. In mingling with the people, their hospitalities and courtesies should be received in the same kindly spirit in which they are given.

Even in the country, on lonely haciendas, everything is free and open-handed. Your servants have the freedom of the kitchen and