

MEXICO'S ARMY

A RAGGED HORDE OF BOTH SEXES

**Fatalism of the Soldiers and
'Soldierettes' of the
Revolution.**

WHY DEATH MEANS NOTHING

**Life So Hard and Hopeless That
Its Ending Really Doesn't
Matter.**

CRUELTY AND SENTIMENT

**They Go Hand In Hand In This
Army—Villa Gets What He Wants
While Respecting Conventionalities.**

**By V. BLASCO IBANEZ,
Author of "The Four Horsemen of
the Apocalypse."**

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II.—THE MEXICAN ARMY.

Mexico once had a regular army that was well organized and quite comparable to the military establishments of other countries. This army was demoralized, first, by the revolution of Madero. During the long civil struggle led by Carranza it fell to pieces completely. The so-called Federal Army was then abolished as a dangerous institution created by Porfirio Diaz. Even the officers' training schools, the military academies, were closed. Anybody who had ever held a commission as a Federal officer was regarded with suspicion by the triumphant revolutionaries.

The "army" now rampant in Mexico is made up of the old revolutionary bands, gradually whipped into the outward appearance of regiments and led by former guerrilleros newly baptized as Colonels. When such regiments are stationed in Mexico City or one of the large towns they are equipped, after a fashion, with uniforms, though the privates never quite succeed in all looking alike. On holidays the officers make a more dazzling display of scarfs and gold lace than any other soldiers on earth, and this bellicose splendor is often in grotesque contrast with the oily skins and unkempt beards that it adorns.

But in the outlying districts the soldier is an ordinary peasant, with that enormous Mexican sombrero which everybody knows, two well-filled cartridge belts stretching bandoleer-fashion from shoulders to waist and crossing at the breast, and, finally, a rifle. Bayonets are not used in the Mexican Army. The city battalions sometimes carry them to piece out their "uniform," but the soldiers do not know what they are for. They are, in fact, of little significance in Mexican warfare, a matter of long-winded fusillades at limit range, the outcome of which each General can interpret to his particular taste, reporting grand strategic conceptions or happy tactical manoeuvres à la Napoleon, as he sees fit. The General with the most cartridges and the greatest endurance in firing them is the one who gets away with the victory.

Obregon against Villa was a Joffre or a Foch so long as he had his back to the port of Vera Cruz. Cartridges came in there every day from the United States, for the American Government was backing Carranza, ungrateful and unappreciative though the First Chief proved to be. Villa, on the other hand, without any support across the border, received no fireworks at all. Eventually he had to decamp, "routed" by the great one-armed strategist of Celaya.

An Army of Both Sexes.

The Mexican Army is composed of men and women.

No one has ever decided conclusively which of the sexes makes the better soldiers.

The Mexican takes his wife everywhere. He is a sentimental chap, readily susceptible to feminine charms and quite likely to be unfaithful to the woman he has sworn to love and cherish. But he cherishes her all the same. His spouse goes with him into sorrow and joy. She shares his comfort and his hardship.

When you are traveling on a Mexican railroad you can give odds that more or less concealed somewhere on the train are the wives of the engineer, the fireman, the brakeman and the conductor. If you feel inclined to prove it, just start a row with one of the trainmen. You will at once have a hysterical woman on your hands, shrieking at the top of her voice and defending her "man" literally with tooth and nail. If an accident ever happens to one of the crew the most heartrending scenes result inevitably. A Mexican refuses to go anywhere without his "old woman." This epithet is a term of endearment. The "old woman" may be twenty years old.

It is the same with the army.

To count the women you count the

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MEXICO'S ARMY A RAGGED HORDE

By V. BLASCO IBANEZ.

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soldiers. Every one of them has a wife, following the regiment everywhere. Most often, also, he has a number of children along.

In peace times in the capital you may see a detachment with shouldered rifles on the way to relieve guard or on an expedition into the country. Just imagine! Alongside the column and keeping step with the men marches a line of copper-colored women, wrapped in black shawls. They are lean and wan, as though the turmoil of that life, without rest or quiet, kept all the flesh stripped from their bones. Each woman carries a basket on one arm. Trotting along at her side are a number of barefoot youngsters. Some of the little fellows are naked. They keep smiling at their daddies, but with a respectful eye out for the officer, a sort of much-feared god, who is always shooing them away when they run up to take their father by the hand.

The "Soldierettes."

Around the barracks at certain hours of the day the doorways and sidewalks are crowded with women, sitting elbow to elbow there in correct military alignment. With their black shawls over light-colored dresses they remind you of so many penguins lined up on the edge of some cliff on the glacial oceans. Each of these women—they are dubbed "soldierettes" by people of wit—has a basket at her feet. She has brought her "man's" dinner.

Right there in the middle of the street, or it may be in a railroad station or out in the open fields, the soldier sits down on the ground with his wife and children round him. And he eats his meal with majestic deliberation and slowness. The women are usually dirty, and often they are in rags and tatters. The miserable life they lead does not lend itself to personal refinements. But the delicacy, the neatness and even the primitive taste with which they prepare these meals is something astonishing. The basket contains, besides food, a large napkin or tablecloth, so to speak. It has a colored border, with wide fringes, so that the woman can stretch it tight on the ground. The plates and deep dishes are in earthenware, with painted frets, suggesting the pottery of the Aztecs.

After the soldier has eaten he gets up, tightens his belt and takes his gun. The little ones wipe their mouths and noses with their knuckles and devotedly kiss their daddy's hand. He pats them on the head in benediction. "God keep you!" is his stock phrase of farewell in revolutionary times, and "Here's hoping they don't kill your papa!" The youngsters do not understand, but the lean, copper-colored woman standing there in her black shawl lowers her head in fatalistic resignation. Death! It is so easy to die in a country of revolutions! That was what her other "man" said as he went away never to come

back. That was the way also with the "man" before that one.

Faithful Unto Death—Only.

For the "soldierette" or "hard-tack," as she is also called (the actual word is "galleta"), is faithful beyond reproach to her "man"; but she goes to another without the slightest hesitation the moment her husband is killed or throws her over. What good is a "soldierette" without a soldier? Neither passion nor beauty figure in these unions. The quality the Mexican soldier most values in his "old woman" is her skill in finding something to eat and in spreading the meal on the ground, her ability to "stand up" under hard work. When a soldier falls he wills his woman to some more fortunate comrade in arms. Since the Mexican Army takes men of all ages, fifteen-year-old boys may be seen living with "hard-tacks" old enough to be their mothers or their grandmothers. And there are wrinkled old men, with white stubble on their chin, who get their meals from girls in their teens, whom they have inherited from soldiers killed in some previous skirmish.

It is during actual fighting in the field that the "soldierette" gives proof of all her powers of endurance and self-sacrifice. Many Mexican Generals have thought of abolishing her, but in the end they have had to compromise with her and finally to seek her support. What else can be done in an army destitute of a supply and sanitary corps? The sick and the wounded cannot be abandoned to chance. The "soldierette" makes up for more than one deficiency in the Mexican military system.

Not only does she look after the soldier. Sometimes her attention is needed by the chief.

"Have you a bite to spare?" the Captain asks one of his men during a halt on march. The officer, not provided as a rule with "hard-tack," is much worse off than the private. "No, Captain, but the Indian will be back soon and she'll be sure to have something." The "Indian" is another pet name used by the soldiers when they get tired of the "old woman."

Foragers of Sorts.

When the troops are on the march the "soldierettes" form the advance guard. They keep several miles ahead, so that when the men arrive the fires will be burning and the meal ready. The towns and villages are more afraid of the women than of the soldiers themselves, though the latter have only the vaguest notions of property rights and the value of human life. The "soldierette" will march for whole days with a brat clinging to either hand, another invisible one awaiting its call into the world, a pack of clothes and bedding on her head, and often, to top off the outfit, a parrot.

With so much impedimenta you would think that woman had trouble enough. In point of fact, she passes over the country like a scourge of God. Along her path not a tree remains with a piece of fruit, not a garden with a turnip, not a coop with a chicken, not a barnyard with a pig. She sweeps everything before her, and the landscape behind has the parched, barren aspect of the desert. It is as

though a plague of locusts had settled on the land. That woman can pick up a good meal in sterile places where any ordinary human being would starve. A village may have been sacked seven times in one week. Give her the chance for an eighth time over and she will turn you out a regular Sunday dinner.

Sometimes as they march long distances ahead of their husbands the "soldierettes" of one regiment will meet the "hard-tacks" of another troop which is advancing to give battle. If both bodies of women are not specially hungry, if some previous pillage has satisfied all immediate needs, the passions of patriotism and politics find occasion to express themselves in noble animosity. The women and children throw sticks, stones and epithets at each other till the males come up and start the real show.

More often, however, both crowds of "soldierettes" are short on provisions of one kind or another. Then they get together on friendly terms. "People have got to live. Why should civilians have to scratch each other's eyes out?" And the ones who have food share it with those who have only money. But Mexican money is often worthless. They much prefer to sell supplies for cartridges. The "men of the soldierettes" are running low on ammunition. The Government troops, on the contrary, have just received a fresh and lavish supply. The Federal "soldierette" will walk back several miles looking for her "man."

"They won't take money," she reports. "They say you get nothing to eat unless you can pay in cartridges." Her "man" expresses no particular interest in the matter. He has been in the same fix himself. "Well, here you are, then!" And he passes over a handful of .44s, one of which may kill him two hours later in the day. The one thing certain is the dinner. Death, at the worst, is only a possibility!

The Mexican's indifference to death is not courage really. Courage is that positive compulsion the man in comradious circumstances feels when, voluntarily and fearlessly, he goes out to meet self-sacrifice and danger. The Mexican has, rather, a mere contempt for life. It is fatalism, absence of fear, more exactly. Death, no matter in how terrible a form, will not prove much worse than life as he is living it! That is the feeling.

Songs of the Army.

Mexico is peopled by music lovers and its inhabitants turn to poetry and song by instinct. The most respected men in any regiment are the ones who can play a guitar well and sing a song for the bedtime hour. The musician's comrades look after him and vie with one another in doing him favors. They keep him away from the firing line, and their first thought as a battle begins is to see that the guitar is in a safe place. "What would happen if we lost our music?"

Another curiosity! With the exception of an air sung by Villa's men called "The Cockroach" (La Cucaracha), all the songs of the revolution are named after women. There are "La Adelita" and "La Valentina," for instance. The "Valentina" is the "Marseillaise" of the present-day

Mexico. When you hear that song around a Mexican camp look out! A revolution is about to break out. And yet its lines are not so bloodthirsty after all. It is the lament of a wandering drunkard addressing himself to a girl named Valentina! The last stanza, however, is alone sufficient to justify the immense popularity of the song:

Valentina, Valentina,
Rendido estoy a tus pies.
Si me han de matar mañana,
Que me maten de una vez.

"Valentina, Valentina, prostrate I lie at your feet. If they are going to kill me tomorrow, they might as well kill me now."

The whole psychology of the Mexican people, its fatalistic resignation, its contempt for death, its acceptance of the misery in which it is living, its inability to buck up and rise, is worked into those last two lines. That is why the song is loved so much. It expresses a national philosophy. "If I have to die tomorrow, I might as well die now."

Revolutionaries by Necessity.

There is no fear that any Mexican revolution will prove a fizzle for lack of men. It might fail for lack of arms, for lack of cash, for lack of understanding between its leaders. But men it will always find in abundance.

The moment it is whispered around that a revolution may break out peons begin to get scarce around the plantations. Any number of them prefer to risk hunger and thirst in the desert provided there is the chance of getting into a town once in a while with a rifle and a free hand!

Then there is the great mass of indifferent, resigned people who fear not even death. Here we find a great majority of the Mexican population, which never start a revolution, but are simply forced into it. "I was living on my farm and bothering nobody," says an old fighter. "First they took my cow; then they took my horse. Finally I said to them: 'Well, if you are going to take everything, give me a rifle and I will go with you.' And my old woman felt the same way about it. After all, what else was there to do?" And so the civil war got one more soldier and one more "soldierette."

The ignorance, the mental apathy, the irresponsibility of these men, is something astounding. They fight each other and they kill each other without the slightest idea of why they are doing it. Meanwhile the newspapers in the pay of the Generals write pompously of the "enthusiastic troops of the revolution" and "the sacred principles for which they are offering their lives."

There was a moment during the second period of the great revolution when Villa was fighting on one side, Carranza on another and the government emanating from the Pact of Aguas-Calientes on still a third. Some of the troops got mixed up as to whom they were fighting for, and they were not sure which "viva" to shout as they began their battle. The point was this: If they cried "viva the wrong person"—and the political situation kept changing from hour to hour—they might get a volley from the troops beside or behind them.

"Say, who the devil are we for?"

one soldier asked of the man next to him as they fired their first shots.

"How should I know?" was the answer. "Better ask the Captain."

"And I wasn't sure myself," said that officer to me, as he told me the story in Mexico a few weeks ago.

Recruiting, Mexican Style.

When a man falls to join an insurrection out of fondness for firearms or out of fatalistic indifference there are indirect ways of persuading him to become a soldier.

I know a Mexican General who enjoys a great reputation among his admirers for his skill in raising troops. "He takes to the mountains," they told me, "with one attendant and a few rifles. He turns up at the end of the month with 500 men. Give him two months and he will have 5,000, and so on till he gets his army."

One evening when I was dining with the General in question he confided some of his trade secrets as an organizer to me. I remember one of his feats in particular. He had come to a mining district to raise some troops. It was a busy place, with everybody working, and wages were good. Nobody wanted to be a soldier. So, on the pretext that the operators were "enemies of the common people," the General had the entrances to the mines blown up. He enlisted 300 men the following day and a thousand before the end of the week. He told the story, moreover, with a show of real pride.

At times these improvised soldiers exhibit a heart-winning ingenuousness. One of them during a battle was crouching with one knee on the ground and firing away into the air with the conscientious regularity of an honest factory hand kicking a footpress. He started with a hundred cartridges. Every now and then he would look at his bandoleers. "That's forty!" "Now that's fifty-five!" When they were all gone he got up and started for the rear. Meeting his Captain, he said: "Here, boss, here's your gun!" The Captain looked at him, but did not understand. "My job's done. I burned the whole hundred of them. Give the next batch to somebody else. Equality, you understand, boss! That's what revolution means." And he was off to look up the "old woman."

Such a concept of war is, of course, a ridiculous one, and it is only fair to add that the Mexican soldier kills and dies with absolute indifference. The "soldierettes," poor beasts of burden that they are, or incubators for soldiers and "soldierettes" of future revolutions, also develop heroic courage under certain circumstances. They care as best they can for the wounded falling on the field, and when their "man" is killed they take up his gun and carry on the fusillade. They have been known to work stratagems in battle worthy of the heroines of antiquity.

Once in an action, where the regiment of men was advancing along a road, I was told that the "soldierettes" and all their children marched along a parallel road. As the women proceeded they began to brush the sun-parched trail with branches they had cut from the trees. A great cloud of dust arose, and the opposing General was completely deceived. "They

have cavalry, * * * probably artillery!" And he ordered a retreat.

"Generalottes" for Generals.

The Generals of the revolution feel that same hankering for home life which makes the private insist on his "hard-tack." The "Generalotte" is as necessary to while away the dull hours of bivouac as the "soldierette," and she rides with her husband on his campaigns.

That is the way with Mexicans. I hope that in my novel "The Eagle and the Snake" I shall have room to analyze more thoroughly the many contradictions in Mexican psychology. A Mexican can be at one and the same time both sentimental and cruel. He will burst into tears at a sad story, and he will order out a firing squad for an execution; he is passionately devoted to home and family, but he is never satisfied unless he is tramping over mountains and deserts in support of an insurrection. Tradition also figures largely in the minds of country people, especially in Mexico.

Villa is a perfect specimen of this latter type. Villa does not smoke. Villa does not drink. His only weakness is women, and the presence of a woman is enough to upset him completely. At the sight of one his massive lower jaw, buttressing that well-known Villa face, has been known to drop, while a trace of foam began to appear at his lips. One might suppose such a man capable of carrying off a lady by main force. Worse things than that figure in Villa's biography. But, as a matter of fact, Villa is a man of principle.

"Things have to be done proper like," says he, "the way God and Holy Mother Church commands."

And when he finds a woman to his

liking he marries her with all the established rites and the greatest possible solemnity. Once he promoted an Indian curate, a relative of his, to be Bishop to celebrate in suitable dignity, mitre and all, his marriage to a Mexican stenographer. The employe in charge of the Government marriage register brought his book to the ceremony, and Villa, who can write nothing but his name, affixed his signature to the matrimonial record. Then he went off with his bride to the Pullman car in which he used to live all the time, much as the old-fashioned bandit chiefs used to live in their dog tents. The next day, when Villa woke up in the morning, the first thing he thought of was to send for the marriage license man and his book. That poor devil obeyed the summons, trembling like a leaf, and sure that his time had come.

"You have that book, eh? * * * Well, * * * show me the page!"

The record in question was pointed out to him and the text explained. At last he was convinced, because he recognized his own signature. And he calmly tore out the leaf, folded it up and put it in his purse.

At last his conscience was clear! He was a man of morals, with respect for established institutions. He was faithful to his first wife, his real wife, and he intended to remain so. He was not going to leave any documents around that some day might cause a scandal.

[Señor Ibanez's next article in this series will appear in tomorrow's (Saturday's) TIMES. The succeeding articles will appear daily thereafter until the series is completed.]