

# *In Merry Mexico*

Stephen Leacock

Illustrated by

C. W. Jefferys

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*Title:* In Merry Mexico

*Date of first publication:* 1917

*Author:* Stephen Leacock (1869-1944)

*Illustrator:* C. W. Jefferys (1869-1951)

*Date first posted:* January 24, 2023

*Date last updated:* January 24, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230137

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

# In Merry Mexico

By Stephen Leacock

*Author of "Sunshine Sketches of a Small Town," "Literary Lapses,"  
"Nonsense Novels," etc.*

Illustrated by C. W. Jefferys

**EDITOR'S NOTE.**—*Stephen Leacock has been traveling for MacLean's Magazine. First, on the magic carpet of his whimsical imagination he visited Germany and "Germany From Within" was the result. Next he went to Turkey, right to the Yildiz Kiosk. Then he came nearer home and "In Dry Toronto" resulted. Finally he has been to Mexico.*

I stood upon the platform of the little deserted railway station of the frontier and looked around at the wide prospect.

"So this," I said to myself, "is Mexico!"

About me was the great plain rolling away to the Sierras in the background. The railroad track traversed it in a thin line. There were no trees—only here and there a clump of cactus or chapparal, a tuft of dog-grass or a few patches of dogwood. At intervals in the distance one could see a hacienda standing in a majestic solitude in a cup of the hills. In the blue sky floated little banderillos of white cloud, while a graceful hidalgo appeared poised on a crag on one leg with folded wings, or floated lazily in the sky on one wing with folded legs.

There was a drowsy busing of cicadas half asleep in the cactus cups, and, from some hidden depth of the hills far in the distance, the tinkling of a mule bell.



*“Magnifico! Is is not?” said my companion.*

I had seen it all so often in moving pictures that I recognized the scene at once.

“So this is Mexico!” I repeated.

The station building beside me was little more than a wooden shack. Its door was closed. There was a sort of ticket wicket opening at the side, but it too was closed.

But as I spoke thus aloud, the wicket opened. There appeared in it the head and shoulders of a little wizened man, swarthy and with bright eyes and pearly teeth.

He wore a black velvet suit with yellow facings, and a tall straw hat running to a point. I seemed to have seen him a hundred times in comic opera.

“Can you tell me when the next train—” I began.

The little man made a gesture of Spanish politeness.

“Welcome to Mexico!” he said.

“Could you tell me——” I continued.

“Welcome to our sunny Mexico!” he repeated, “our beautiful, glorious Mexico. Her heart throbs at the sight of you.”

“Would you mind——” I began again.

“Our beautiful Mexico, torn and distracted as she is, greets you. In the name of the *de facto* government, thrice welcome. *Su casa!*” he added with a graceful gesture indicating the interior of his little shack. “Come in and smoke cigarettes and sleep. *Su casa!* You are capable of Spanish, is it not?”

“No,” I said, “it is not. But I wanted to know when the next train for the interior——”

“Ah!” he rejoined more briskly. “You address me as a servant of the *de facto* government. *Momentino!* One moment!”

**H**e shut the wicket and was gone a long time. I thought he had fallen asleep.

But he reappeared. He had a bundle of what looked like railway time tables, very ancient and worn, in his hand.

“Did you say,” he questioned, “the interior or the exterior?”

“The interior, please.”

“Ah, good, excellent—for the interior——” the little Mexican retreated into his shack and I could hear him murmuring—“for the interior, excellent”—as he moved to and fro.

Presently he reappeared, a look of deep sorrow on his face. “Alas!” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I am *desolado*. It has gone! The next train has gone!”

“Gone! When?”

“Alas! Who can tell? Yesterday, last month? But it has gone.”

“And when will there be another one?” I asked.

“Ha!” he said, resuming a brisk official manner. “I understand. Having missed the next you propose to take another. Excellent! What business enterprise you foreigners have! You miss your train! What do you do? Do

you abandon your journey? No. Do you sit down—do you weep? No. Do you lose time? You do not.”

“Excuse me,” I said. “But when is there another train?”

“That must depend,” said the little official and as he spoke he emerged from his house and stood beside me on the platform fumbling among his railway guides. “The first question is, do you propose to take a *de facto* train or a *de jure* train?”

“When do they go?” I asked.

“There is a *de jure* train,” continued the station master, peering into his papers, “at two p.m.—very good train—sleepers and diners—one at four, a through train—sleepers, observation car, dining car, corridor compartments—that also is a *de jure* train——”

“But what is the difference between the *de jure* and the *de facto*?”

“It’s a distinction we generally make in Mexico; the *de jure* trains are those that ought to go; that is, in theory, they go. The *de facto* trains are those that actually do go. It is a distinction clearly established in our correspondence with Huedro Huilson.”

“Do you mean Woodrow Wilson?”

“Yes, Huedro Huilson, president—*de jure*—of the United States.”

“Oh,” I said. “Now I understand. And when will there be a *de facto* train?”

“At any moment you like,” said the little official with a bow.

“But I don’t see——”

“Pardon me—I have one here behind the shed on that side track—excuse me—one moment and I will bring it.”

**H**e disappeared and I presently saw him energetically pushing out from behind the shed a little railroad lorry or hand truck.

“Now then,” he said as he shoved his little car on to the main track, “this is the train. Seat yourself. I, myself, will take you.”

“And how much shall I pay? What is the fare to the interior?” I questioned.

The little man waved the idea aside with a polite gesture.

“The fare,” he said, “let us not speak of it. Let us forget it. How much money have you?”

“I have here,” I said, taking out a roll of bills, “fifty dollars.”

“And that is all you have?”

“Yes.”

“Then let that be the fare! Why should I ask more? Were I an American, I might; but in our Mexico, no. What you have we take; beyond that we ask nothing. Let us forget it. Good. And, now, would you prefer to travel first, second or third class?”

“First class, please,” I said.

“Very good. Let it be so.” Here the little man took from his pocket a red label marked FIRST CLASS and tied it on the edge of the hand car. “It is more comfortable,” he said. “Now seat yourself, seize hold of these two handles in front of you. Move them back and forward, thus. Beyond that you need do nothing. The working of the car other than the mere shoving of the handles, shall be my task. Consider yourself, in fact, señor, as my guest.”



*His head was bowed over the books in front of him.*

**W**e took our places. I applied myself, as directed, to the handles and the little car moved forward across the plain.

“A glorious prospect,” I said, as I gazed at the broad panorama.

“Magnifico! Is it not?” said my companion. “Alas! my poor Mexico. She wants nothing but water to make her the most fertile country of the globe! Water and soil, those only and she would excel all others. Give her but water, soil, light, heat, capital and labor, and what could she not be! And what do we see: distraction, revolution, destruction—pardon me, will you please stop the car a moment? I wish to tear up a little of the track behind us.”

I did as directed. My companion descended and with a little bar that he took from beneath the car, unloosed a few of the rails of the light track and laid them beside the road.



“It is our custom,” he explained, as he climbed on board again. “We Mexicans when we move to and fro, always tear up the track behind us. But what was I saying? Ah, yes—destruction, desolation, alas, our Mexico!”

He looked sadly up at the sky.

“You speak,” I said, “like a patriot. May I ask your name?”

“My name is Raymon,” he answered, with a bow. “Raymon Domenico y Miraflores de las Gracias.”

“And may I call you simply Raymon?”

“I shall be delirious with pleasure if you will do so,” he answered. “And dare I ask you in return, your business in our beautiful country?”

The car, as we are speaking, had entered upon a long and gently down grade across the plain, so that it ran without great effort on my part.

“Certainly,” I said. “I’m going into the interior to see General Villa!”

At the shock of the name, Raymon nearly fell off the car.

“Villa! General Francesco Villa! It is not possible!”

The little man was shivering with evident fear.

“See him! See Villa! Not possible. Let me show you a picture of him instead? But approach him—it is not possible! He shoots everybody at sight!”

“That is all right,” I said. “I have a written safe conduct that protects me.”

“From whom?”

“Here,” I said. “Look at them—I have two.”

Raymon took the documents I gave him and read aloud.

“The bearer is on an important mission connected with American rights in Mexico. If any one shoots him he will be held to a strict accountability.—W.W.”

“Ah! Excellent! He will be compelled to send in an itemized account. Excellent! And this other, let me see.”

“If anybody interferes with the bearer, I will knock his face in.  
—T.R.”

“Admirable! This is, if anything, better than the other for use in our country. It appeals to our quick Mexican natures. It is, as we say, *simpatico*. It touches us.”

“It is meant to,” I said.

“And may I ask,” said Raymon, “the nature of your business with Villa?”

“We are old friends,” I answered. “I used to know him years ago when he kept a Mexican cigar store in Montreal. It occurred to me that I might be able to help the cause of peaceful intervention. I have already had a certain experience in Turkey. I am commissioned to make General Villa an offer.”

“I see,” said Raymon. “In that case, if we are to find Villa let us make all haste forward. And first we must direct ourselves yonder”—he pointed in a vague way towards the mountains—“where we must presently leave our car and go on foot, to the camp of General Carranza.”

“Carranza!” I exclaimed. “But he is fighting Villa!”

“Exactly. It is *possible*—not certain—but possible, that he knows where Villa is. In our Mexico when two of our generalistas are fighting in the mountains, they keep coming across one another. It is hard to avoid it.”

**I**t was two days later that we reached Carranza’s camp in the mountains. We found him just at dusk seated at a little table beneath a tree.

His followers were all about picketing their horses and lighting fires.

The General, buried in a book before him, noticed neither the movements of his own men nor our approach.

I must say that I was surprised beyond measure at his appearance.

The popular idea of General Carranza as a rude bandit chief is entirely erroneous.

I saw before me a quiet, scholarly-looking man, bearing every mark of culture and refinement. His head was bowed over the book in front of him, which I noticed with astonishment was *Todhunter’s Algebra*. Close at his hand I observed a work on *Decimal Fractions*, while, from time to time, I saw the General lift his eyes and glance keenly at a multiplication table that hung on a bough beside him.

“You must wait a few moments,” said an aide-de-camp, who stood beside us. “The General is at work on a simultaneous equation!”

“Is it possible?” I said in astonishment.

The aide-de-camp smiled. “Soldiering to-day, my dear Señor,” he said, “is an exact science. On this equation will depend our entire food supply for the next week.”

“When will he get it done?” I asked anxiously.

“Simultaneously,” said the aide-de-camp. The general looked up at this moment and saw us.

“Well?” he asked.

“Your Excellency,” said the aide-de-camp, “there is a stranger here on a visit of investigation to Mexico.”

“Shoot him!” said the General, and turned quickly to his work.

The aide de camp saluted.

“When?” he asked.

“As soon as he likes,” said the General.

“You are fortunate, indeed,” said the aide-de-camp in a tone of animation, as he led them away, still accompanied by Raymon. “You might have been kept waiting round for days. Let us get ready at once. You would like to be shot, would you not, smoking a cigarette, and standing beside your grave? Luckily, we have one ready. Now if you will wait a moment, I will bring the photographer and his machine. There is still light enough, I think. What would you like it called? *The Fate of a Spy*? That’s good, isn’t it? Our syndicate can always work up that into a two-reel film. All the rest of it—the camp, the mountains, the general, the funeral and so on—we can do tomorrow without you.”

He was all eagerness as he spoke.

“One moment,” I interrupted. “I am sure there is some mistake. I only wished to present certain papers and get a safe conduct from the General to go and see Villa.”

The aide-de-camp stopped abruptly.

“Ah!” he said. “You are not here for a picture. A thousand pardons. Give me your papers—one moment—I will return to the General and explain.”

He vanished, and Raymon and I waited in the growing dusk.

“No doubt the General supposed,” explained Raymon, as he lighted a cigarette, “that you were here for *las machinas*, the moving pictures.”

In a few minutes the aide-de-camp returned.

“Come,” he said, “the General will see you now.”

We returned to where we had left Carranza.

The General rose to meet me with outstretched hand and with a gesture of simple cordiality.

“You must pardon my error,” he said.

“Not at all,” I said.

“It appears you do not desire to be shot.”

“Not at present.”

“Later, perhaps,” said the General. “On your return, no doubt, provided,” he added with grave courtesy that sat well on him, “that you do return. My aide-de-camp shall make a note of it. But at present you wish to be guided to Francesco Villa?”

“If it is possible.”

“Quite easy. He is at present near here, in fact much nearer than he has any right to be.”

The General frowned. “We found this spot first. The light is excellent and the mountains, as you have seen, are wonderful for our pictures. This is, by every rule of decency, our scenery. Villa has no right to it. This is our revolution”—the General spoke with rising animation—“not his. When you see the fellow, tell him for me—or tell his manager—that he must either move his revolution further away—or, by Heaven, I’ll—I’ll use force against him. But stop,” he checked himself. “You wish to see Villa. Good. You have only to follow the straight track over the mountain there. He is just beyond, at the little village in the hollow. El Corazon de las Quertas.”

The General shook hands and seated himself again at his work. The interview was at an end. We withdrew.

**T**he next morning we followed without difficulty the path indicated. A few hours’ walk over the mountain pass brought us to a little straggling village of adobe houses, sleeping drowsily in the sun.

There were but few signs of life in its one street—a mule here and there tethered in the sun—and one or two Mexicans drowsily smoking in the shade.

One building only, evidently newly made, and of lumber, had a decidedly American appearance. Its doorway bore the sign “GENERAL OFFICES OF THE COMPANY,” and under it the notice “KEEP OUT,” while on one of its windows was painted “GENERAL MANAGER,” and below it the legend, “NO ADMISSION,” and on the other, “SECRETARY’S OFFICE: GO AWAY.”

We therefore entered at once.

“General Francesco Villa?” said a clerk, evidently American. “Yes, he’s here all right. At least, this is the office.”

“And where is the General?” I asked.

The clerk turned to an assistant at a desk in a corner of the room.

“Where’s Frank working this morning?” he asked.

“Over down in the gulch,” said the other, turning round for a moment. “There’s an attack of American cavalry this morning.”

“Oh, yes, I forgot,” said the chief clerk. “I thought it was the Indian Massacre, but I guess that’s for to-morrow. Go straight to the end of the street and turn left about a half a mile and you’ll find the boys down there.”

We thanked him and withdrew.

**W**e passed across the open plaza, and went down a narrow side road, bordered here and there with adobe houses, and so out into the open country. Here the hills rose again and the road that we followed wound sharply round a turn into a deep gorge, bordered with rocks and sage brush. We had no sooner turned the curve of the road than we came upon a scene of great activity. Men in Mexican costume were running to and fro apparently arranging a sort of barricade at the side of the road. Others seemed to be climbing the rocks on the further side of the gorge, as if seeking points of advantage. I noticed that all were armed with rifles and machetes and presented a formidable appearance. Of Villa himself I could see nothing. But there was a grim reality about the glittering knives, the rifles and the maxim guns that I saw concealed in the sage brush beside the road.

“What is it?” I asked of a man who was standing idle, watching the scene from the same side of the road as ourselves.

“Attack of American cavalry,” he said nonchalantly.

“Here!” I gasped.

“Yep, in about ten minutes: soon as they are ready.”

“Where’s Villa?”

“It’s him they’re attacking. They chase him here, see! This is an ambush. Villa rounds on them right here, and they fight to a finish!”

“Great Heavens!” I exclaimed. “How do you know that?”

“Know it? Why, because I *seen* it. Ain’t they been trying it out for three days? Why, I’d be in it myself only I’m off work—got a sore toe yesterday—horse stepped on it.”

All this was, of course, quite unintelligible to me.

“But it’s right here where they’re going to fight?” I asked.

“Sure,” said the American, as he moved carelessly aside, “as soon as the boss gets it all ready.”

**I** now noticed for the first time a heavy-looking man in an American tweed suit and a white plug hat, moving to and fro calling out directions with an air of authority.

“Here!” he shouted, “what in h--l are you doing with that machine gun! You’ve got it clean out of focus. Here, José, come in closer—that’s right—steady there now, and don’t forget, at the second whistle you and Pete are dead. Here, you, Pete, how in thunder do you think you can die there? You’re all out of the picture hidden by that there sage bush. That’s no place to die. And, boys, remember one thing, now, *die slow*. Ed.”—he turned and called apparently to some one invisible behind the rocks—“when them two boys is killed, turn her round on them, slew her round good and get them centre focus. Now then, are you all set? Ready?”

At this moment the speaker turned and saw Raymon and myself. “Here, youse,” he shouted, “get further back; you’re in the picture. Or, say, no, stay right where you are. You,” he said, pointing to me, “stay right where you are and I’ll give you a dollar to just hold that horror; you understand; just keep on registering it. Don’t do another thing; just register that face.”

His words were meaningless to me. I had never known before that it was possible to make money by merely registering my face.

“No, no,” cried out Raymon, “my friend here is not wanting work. He has a message, a message of great importance for General Villa.”

“Well,” called back the boss, “he’ll have to wait. We can’t stop now. All ready, boys? One—two—now!”



*In the thick of the press a leader of ferocious aspect mounted upon a gigantic black horse, waved a sombrero above his head.*

and with that he put a whistle to his lips and blew a long shrill blast.

**A** Then in a moment the whole scene was transformed. Rifle shots rang out from every crag and bush that bordered the gully.

A wild scamper of horses' hoofs was heard and in a moment there came tearing down the road a whole troop of mounted Mexicans, evidently in flight, for they turned and fired from their saddles as they rode. The horses that carried them were wild with excitement and flecked with foam. The Mexican cavalry men shouted and yelled, brandishing their machetes and firing their revolvers. Here and there a horse and rider fell to the ground in a great whirl of sand and dust. In the thick of the press, a leader of ferocious aspect, mounted upon a gigantic black horse, waved his sombrero about his head.

"Villa—it is Villa!" cried Raymon, tense with excitement; "is he not *magnifico*? But look! Look—the *Americanos*! They are coming!"

**I**t was a glorious sight to see them as they rode madly on the heels of the Mexicans—a whole company of American cavalry, their horses shoulder to shoulder, the men bent low in their saddles, their carbines gripped in their hands. They rode in squadrons and in line, not like the shouting, confused mass of the Mexicans—but steady, disciplined, irresistible.

On the right flank in front a grey-haired officer steadied the charging line.

The excitement of it was maddening.

"Go to it," I shouted in uncontrollable emotion. "Your Mexicans are licked, Raymon, they're no good!"

"But look!" said Raymon; "see—the ambush, the ambuscade!"

For as they reached the centre of the gorge in front of us the Mexicans suddenly checked their horses, bringing them plunging on their haunches in the dust, and then swung round upon their pursuers, while from every crag and bush at the side of the gorge the concealed riflemen sprang into view—and the sputtering of the machine guns swept the advancing column with a volley.

We could see the American line checked as with the buffet of a great wave, men and horses rolling in the road. Through the smoke one saw the grey-haired leader, dismounted, his uniform torn, his hat gone, but still brandishing his sword and calling his orders to his men, his face as one caught in a flash of sunlight, steady and fearless. His words I could not hear,



but one saw the American cavalry, still unbroken, dismount, thrown themselves behind their horses, and fire with steady aim into the mass of Mexicans. We could see the Mexicans in front of where we stood falling thick and fast, in little huddled bundles of color, kicking the sand. The man Pete had gone down right in the foreground and was breathing out his soul before our eyes.

“Well done,” I shouted. “Go to it, boys! You can lick ’em yet! Hurrah for the United States. Look Raymon, look! They’ve shot down the crew of the machine guns. See, see—the Mexicans are turning to run—at ’em, boys!—they’re waving the American flag! There it is in all the thick of the smoke! Hark! There’s the bugle call to mount again! They’re going to charge again! Here they come!”

As the American cavalry came tearing forward, the Mexicans leaped from their places with gestures of mingled rage and terror as if about to break and run.

The battle, had it continued, could have but one end.

But at this moment we heard from the town behind us the long sustained note of a steam whistle blowing the hour of noon.

In an instant the firing ceased.

**T**he battle stopped. The Mexicans picked themselves up off the ground and began brushing off the dust from their black velvet jackets. The American cavalry reined in their horses. Dead Pete came to life. General Villa and the American leader and a number of others strolled over towards the boss, who stood beside the fence vociferating his comments.

“That won’t do!” he was shouting. “That won’t do! Where in blazes was that infernal Sister of Mercy? Miss Jenkinson!” and he called to a tall girl, whom I now noticed for the first time among the crowd, wearing a sort of khaki costume and a short skirt and carrying a water bottle in a strap. “You never got into the picture at all. I want you right in there among the horses, under their feet.”

“Land sakes!” said the Sister of Mercy. “You ain’t got no right to ask me to go in there among them horses and be trampled.”

“Ain’t you *paid* to be trampled?” said the manager angrily. Then as he caught sight of Villa he broke off and said: “Frank, you boys done fine. It’s

going to be a good act, all right. But it ain't just got the right amount of ginger in it yet. We'll try her over again, anyway."

"Now, boys," he continued, calling out to the crowd with a voice like a megaphone, "this afternoon at three-thirty—Hospital scene. I only want the wounded, the doctors and the Sisters of Mercy. All the rest of youse is free till ten to-morrow—for the Indian Massacre. Everybody up for that."

**I**t was an hour or two later that I had my interview with Villa in a back room of the little *posada*, or inn, of the town. The General had removed his ferocious wig of straight black hair, and substituted a check suit for his war-like costume. He had washed the darker part of the paint off his face—in fact, he looked once again the same Frank Villa that I used to know when he kept his Mexican cigar store in Montreal.

"Well, Frank," I said, "I'm afraid I came down here under a misunderstanding."

"Looks like it," said the General, as he rolled a cigarette.

"And you wouldn't care to go back even for the offer that I am commissioned to make—your old job back again, and half the profits on a new cigar to be called the Francesco Villa?"

The General shook his head.

"It sounds good, all right," he said, "but this moving picture business is better."

"I see," I said. "I hadn't understood. I thought there really was a revolution here in Mexico."

"No," said Villa, shaking his head, "been no revolution down here for years—not since Diaz. The picture companies came in and took the whole thing over: they made us a fair offer—so much a reel straight out, and a royalty, and let us divide up the territory as we liked. The first film we done was the bombardment of Vera Cruz—say, that was a dandy—did you see it?"

"No," I said.

"They had us all in that," he continued. "I done an American Marine. Lots of people think it all real when they see it."

"Why," I said, "nearly everybody does. Even the President——"

“Oh, I guess he knows,” said Villa, “but, you see, there’s tons of money in it and it’s good for business, and he’s too decent a man to give it away. Say, I heard the boys saying there’s a war in Europe. I wonder what company got that up, eh? But I don’t believe it’ll draw. There ain’t the scenery for it that we have in Mexico.”

“Alas!” murmured Raymon. “Our beautiful Mexico. To what is she fallen! Needing only water, air, light and soil to make her——”

“Come on, Raymon,” I said, “let’s go home.”

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *In Merry Mexico* by Stephen Leacock]