

CHAPTER XIV

SAN JACINTO

THE fall of the Alamo and Urrea's destruction of Grant's small force had convinced Santa Anna—according to his second in command—that the war was at an end, and when Fannin's command was captured, he felt that his presence at the front was no longer needed, and that he might return to Mexico to enjoy his triumph. His plan was to go himself by sea, and to send back a large part of the artillery and wagon-train by land. He had previously, as we have seen, sent off Gaona in one direction, and Ramírez y Sesma in another, so that by the twenty-fifth of March his army was divided into four parts, of approximately equal size, separated from each other by several days' march, and liable to be attacked and beaten in detail if the Texans possessed any military force whatever. Filisola was much alarmed, as he states, at this condition of things, and with the help of Colonel Almonte of the staff, who had Santa Anna's confidence, was able to induce the latter to rescind the order for the return of the artillery and wagons to Mexico, and to take some steps looking to the concentration of his scattered troops.¹ What the Texan forces might still amount to, was, however, a matter as to which the Mexican officers were entirely in the dark.

Houston, as already stated, had attended the convention at Washington on the Brazos long enough to sign the declaration of independence, and have his appointment as commander-in-chief confirmed. He left Washington early on the morning of Monday, the seventh of March, the day after the Alamo had fallen. By the next Friday afternoon he was at Gonzales, where he found three or four hundred men gath-

¹ Filisola, *Defensa*, 10-12.

ered together without organization of any kind. A few minutes after his arrival a report was received from Mexican *rancheros* that the Alamo had fallen.

Whether the report was true or false, the obvious thing to do was to concentrate the remaining Texan forces as soon as possible; and Houston's first act was to send orders to Fannin to blow up the presidio at Goliad, to throw his heavy guns into the river, to fall back on Victoria, and to send from there one-third of his force to Gonzales. Of Fannin's fatal neglect to obey these orders, literally and promptly, no more need be said.

The Alamo had been taken on the sixth of March, but it was not until Monday, the fourteenth, that Houston received tragic and convincing evidence of the fact. Mrs. Dickinson, whose husband had been an officer of the garrison, arrived at Gonzales with her child, escorted by two negroes—one a servant of Colonel Bowie's, the other a servant of Santa Anna's aid, Colonel Almonte. Mrs. Dickinson and her child, with two Mexican women and Colonel Bowie's servant had been in the Alamo at the time of the assault, and as non-combatants their lives had been spared by the Mexicans.

Houston's retreat from Gonzales was immediately begun, and begun in a panic. Clothing was destroyed; the two pieces of artillery in possession of the Texans were thrown into the river, and the wagons belonging to the troops were turned over to the fleeing inhabitants for the removal of their household goods. There was, if Houston had only known it, no necessity whatever for this headlong haste and destruction of valuable supplies; but much more serious than the loss of property was the moral effect produced on the people of Texas. The story of Houston's precipitate retreat spread, with every circumstance exaggerated. Well-founded fear of the Mexican soldiery urged the inhabitants to abandon their homes; and from one end of the settlements to another, men, women, and children fled frantically toward the boundary, where the strong arm of the United States was trusted to protect them. Men who might have been with the army were carrying off their women and

children, and saving what they could of their movable property. And in the rear, as well as in all the front of Houston's command, was an uninhabited zone, where abandoned or burning dwellings and untended fields were almost the only signs that the country had ever been occupied. The fact was tragic enough to the participants at the time, but when the danger was over it was treated as a joke. "The runaway scrape" became the recognized name of this episode.

Starting from Gonzales a little before midnight on the fourteenth of March, Houston by the afternoon of the seventeenth was encamped with about six hundred men at Burnham's Crossing, on the Colorado, not far from the present town of La Grange. On the same day General Gaona, with his brigade, reached that river at Bastrop, higher up, where he was delayed by floods; and from this time forward he ceased to be a factor in the campaign. Ramírez y Sesma at the same time was on the march for San Felipe, and was somewhere between Gonzales and Columbus. Urrea had just reached Goliad, and Santa Anna, with the rest of the army, was at Béxar, nearly a hundred miles distant from any one of his three detachments.

After halting at Burnham's for two days, Houston crossed the Colorado to the east bank, and marched down on that side to Beason's Ferry, nearly opposite the site of the present town of Columbus, where he remained for about a week, drilling, organizing, sending out appeals for men and supplies, and doing his best to allay the panic among the settlers.

Meanwhile the Mexican advance, numbering about seven hundred men under Ramírez y Sesma, had reached and halted upon the opposite (right) bank of the Colorado; but as Houston had secured all the boats and the river was in flood, they were unable to cross. On March 24, therefore, Ramírez reported to Santa Anna, who was still at Béxar, that the Texans were in front of him, twelve hundred strong;¹

¹ These figures were, at that time, fairly accurate, as Houston received considerable accessions while encamped on the Colorado.—(E. C. Barker, "The San Jacinto Campaign," in *Tex. Hist. Quar.*, IV, 244.)

that until he was reinforced a crossing in the face of the enemy was impracticable; and that when reinforcements arrived he proposed crossing fifteen leagues or more further down.¹

This report came in time to confirm the arguments of Filisola and Almonte as to the danger of dividing the army. Concentration was at once attempted. Gaona was ordered to march from Bastrop for San Felipe, Urrea was ordered to proceed from Victoria in the same direction, and Ramírez was directed not to attempt to cross the Colorado unless the Texans should retire, and was notified that six hundred men had started from Béxar to reinforce him. But before these orders reached Ramírez, Houston had received the news of Fannin's surrender, and had retreated once more, abandoning the line of the Colorado and falling back to the Brazos. Why he did so was never adequately explained. On March 28, he reached San Felipe, and on the next day marched up the west bank of the Brazos River, leaving a force of over one hundred men in San Felipe, and sending another hundred down the river to Fort Bend, near Richmond.² That evening, March 29, after a difficult march over muddy roads and in the midst of heavy rain, he encamped on Mill Creek, a tributary of the Brazos, quite undecided as to the future movements of his force. But by the thirty-first he had placed himself in what he considered a "secure and effective position" on the west bank of the river at Groce's Ferry, some fifteen miles above San Felipe, where he found and detained a steam-boat; and there he remained for a fortnight.

Santa Anna himself had arrived at the Colorado River on April 5, where he found that Ramírez y Sesma was across with a part of his force. Leaving Filisola to hasten the movements of the rest of the army, Santa Anna set out with the leading brigade for San Felipe, which he reached on the morning of April 7. He found the place abandoned and in

¹ Filisola, II, 441.

² It is perhaps more accurate to say that these men refused to follow Houston's march up the river, which appeared then and appears now, an entire waste of effort. See *Tex. Hist. Quar.*, IV, 246.

ruins—having been burned either by the flying citizens or by Houston's men. On the opposite (east) bank the detachment of a hundred Texans or more were still on guard; but the Brazos also was in flood, the Texans had secured all the boats, and Santa Anna was unable to cross. He had no pontoons, and to make boats or rafts capable of ferrying over his men and guns would (he asserted) be the work of ten or twelve days. According to his critics, it could have been accomplished in three.

Santa Anna's impatient disposition could not endure a delay. Although Filisola was not yet up, and nothing had been heard of Gaona, who was supposed to be on the march from Bastrop to San Felipe, Santa Anna judged Houston to be in a desperate situation, and he therefore determined to make, as he said, a reconnoissance for ten or twelve leagues *down* the river. Why he went *down* the river when he knew that Houston had gone *up*, is one of the mysteries of this singular campaign.

Taking with him only a hundred men, Santa Anna started southwesterly on April 9 from San Felipe, then followed the valley of the San Bernardo River for some distance, then turned east, and on Monday, the eleventh, again reached the banks of the Brazos, at Thompson's Ferry, at the "Old Fort," or Orozimbo, some twenty miles below the modern town of Richmond. Here he seized two or three boats, which gave him the means of crossing the river, and sent back for the troops that were encamped at San Felipe. Ramírez y Sesma, with his men, joined him two days later.

At Thompson's Ferry Santa Anna was informed that Burnet and Zavala—the President and Vice-President of Texas—with other leaders of the insurrection, were at Harrisburg, only twelve leagues (really about thirty miles) away, and that they could easily be captured by a prompt movement. As they had no military guard, it would have been quite sufficient to send a troop of cavalry to effect the arrest of these ten or a dozen civilians; but Santa Anna, probably for the sake of effect, decided to go himself at the head of a considerable force.

The day after Ramírez joined him, Thursday, April 14, orders were sent to Urrea directing him to hurry forward and occupy Brazoria, and to send small parties up and down the west bank of the river.¹ Cos, with five hundred men, was detached from the main body and ordered to Velasco, at the mouth of the Brazos, with orders to march thence along the sea-shore toward Galveston Bay. By the same afternoon Santa Anna himself crossed the river with about seven hundred and fifty men, leaving Ramírez in command at Thompson's Ferry, and also leaving sealed orders for Filisola, who was then on his way from San Felipe. The commander-in-chief was now more convinced than ever that the insurrection was practically at an end. He had, indeed, some apparent justification for his confidence. He had marched two-thirds of the distance from the Rio Grande to the Sabine; he had thus far overcome every obstacle; and he had seen the only organized force of Texans constantly retreating before him.

The next evening, Friday, April 15, Santa Anna was in Harrisburg, but found it in flames and deserted, the President and his cabinet having fled to Galveston. Santa Anna thereupon decided to push on to eastern Texas, following the road through Lynchburg, or Lynch's Ferry, over the San Jacinto River, distant about fifteen miles.

On Saturday morning he sent his aid, Colonel Almonte, with a small escort, to reconnoitre the ferry and the shores of Galveston Bay as far as New Washington. Almonte, who had been secretary of the Mexican legation to the United States, and spoke English perfectly, reported the next day that he had talked to a number of colonists, and had learned that Houston was retreating to the Trinity River by way of Lynchburg.²

Santa Anna believed that the time had now come to strike a final blow, and to destroy the flying and demoralized enemy.

¹ See text in Filisola, II, 447. Urrea received his orders on April 15.

² Santa Anna had written to Urrea on the thirteenth: "the so-called Gen. Houston appears to be marching for the said point [Harrisburg] and has about 600 or 800 men altogether, and is the only hope of the traitors."—(Filisola, II, 448.)

"To cut off Houston from the ferry," he wrote in his official report, "and to destroy at one blow the armed force and the hopes of the rebels, was too important to let the opportunity escape. It was my intention to seize the Lynchburg Ferry before he came up, and avail myself of the advantages of the ground. My first step was limited to reinforcing the detachment accompanying me, which consisted of one piece of artillery, seven hundred infantry and fifty cavalry, so as to make it as superior in numbers as it was in discipline; and I ordered General Filisola to stop General Cos's movement on Velasco, which my previous orders had directed, and to send forward promptly five hundred picked men from the infantry to join me at the earliest possible moment. . . . But as Colonel Almonte was at the port of New Washington, on the shores of Galveston Bay, engaged with the enemy's vessels, and as it was necessary at the same time to make sure of the supply of provisions which he had managed to collect, I made one day's march to that point, arriving in the afternoon of the eighteenth."¹

At New Washington (a hamlet of four or five houses) Santa Anna, with his seven hundred and fifty men, remained from Monday afternoon, the eighteenth of March, to Wednesday morning, the twentieth. He had put himself in a very dangerous position. He was at least thirty miles from the main body of his army, and Houston, with a superior force, was now virtually interposed between the two divisions. Moreover, the detaching of Gaona in one direction and of Urrea in another had greatly diminished the numbers which Santa Anna could in any event rely on, and an active and vigilant commander on the Texan side might have successively fought these fractions and beaten them in detail.

Houston, however, though vigilant, was far from active. He had been most averse to stirring from his camp at Groce's Ferry in search of adventures of any kind. His responsibility he felt to be extremely heavy—no less, indeed, than the total loss of Texas; and it is highly probable that, with the ingrained distrust of the regular army officer, he doubted the capacity of his un-uniformed, unorganized, undisciplined, and undrilled volunteers to stand against an army which he believed to be superior to his own, both in equipment and in discipline. He did not, indeed, exagger-

¹ Santa Anna's *Manifesto*, 63.

ate the Mexican numbers, for his reports as to all the enemy's movements proved to be, in general, surprisingly accurate; but his hesitations and misgivings were apparently due solely to his sense of the enormous disaster that would follow a defeat. He could not bring himself to stake all his fortunes on the result of a single battle.

Houston's citizen-soldiers were of a very different mind, and were not at all disposed to be chary of advice or to refrain from criticism; but he kept his own counsels and refused to be hurried into courses he did not approve. On his arrival at the Brazos he wrote to the Secretary of War of the grumblings of his men. "Many wished me to go below, others above. I consulted none—I held no councils of war. If I err, the blame is mine. . . . There was on yesterday, as I understood, much discontent in the lines because I would not fall down the river."¹ But a fortnight later he reported that under the most disadvantageous circumstances he had kept an army together "where there has not been even murmuring or insubordination."² The revolutionary government of Texas also kept up a fire of criticism, but he contented himself with temperate and straightforward statements of the difficulties of his position.

The silence of his men does not seem, however, to have been due to acquiescence in Houston's policy, or to confidence in his methods. On the contrary, it was rather the silence of conspirators, for the project of a mutiny, and of deposing him from command were seriously discussed.³

In spite of complaints and criticisms Houston, however, held on doggedly to his position at Groce's Ferry for nearly a fortnight, but at length, on Monday, the eleventh of April—the day on which Santa Anna reached Thompson's Ferry, lower down the river—he made up his mind that it was time for him to move. He was in no hurry. Orders were sent to all his parties along the river to join him at a designated place, and on the Tuesday morning he began crossing in the

¹ Houston to Rusk, March 29, 1836; Yoakum, II, 485.

² Houston to Thomas, April 13, 1836; *ibid.*, 497.

³ *Tex. Hist. Quar.*, IV, 249, 282, 302, 311, 331.

steam-boat he had seized—an operation which consumed two days. Having got his whole force over, with the wagons and horses, he halted on the east bank of the river until all the outlying parties had come up and he had received two four-pounder guns—a gift from the people of Cincinnati. And then on Saturday, the sixteenth of April, everything being ready to his mind, he left the Brazos and began his march to the east. It was the day after Santa Anna had occupied Harrisburg.

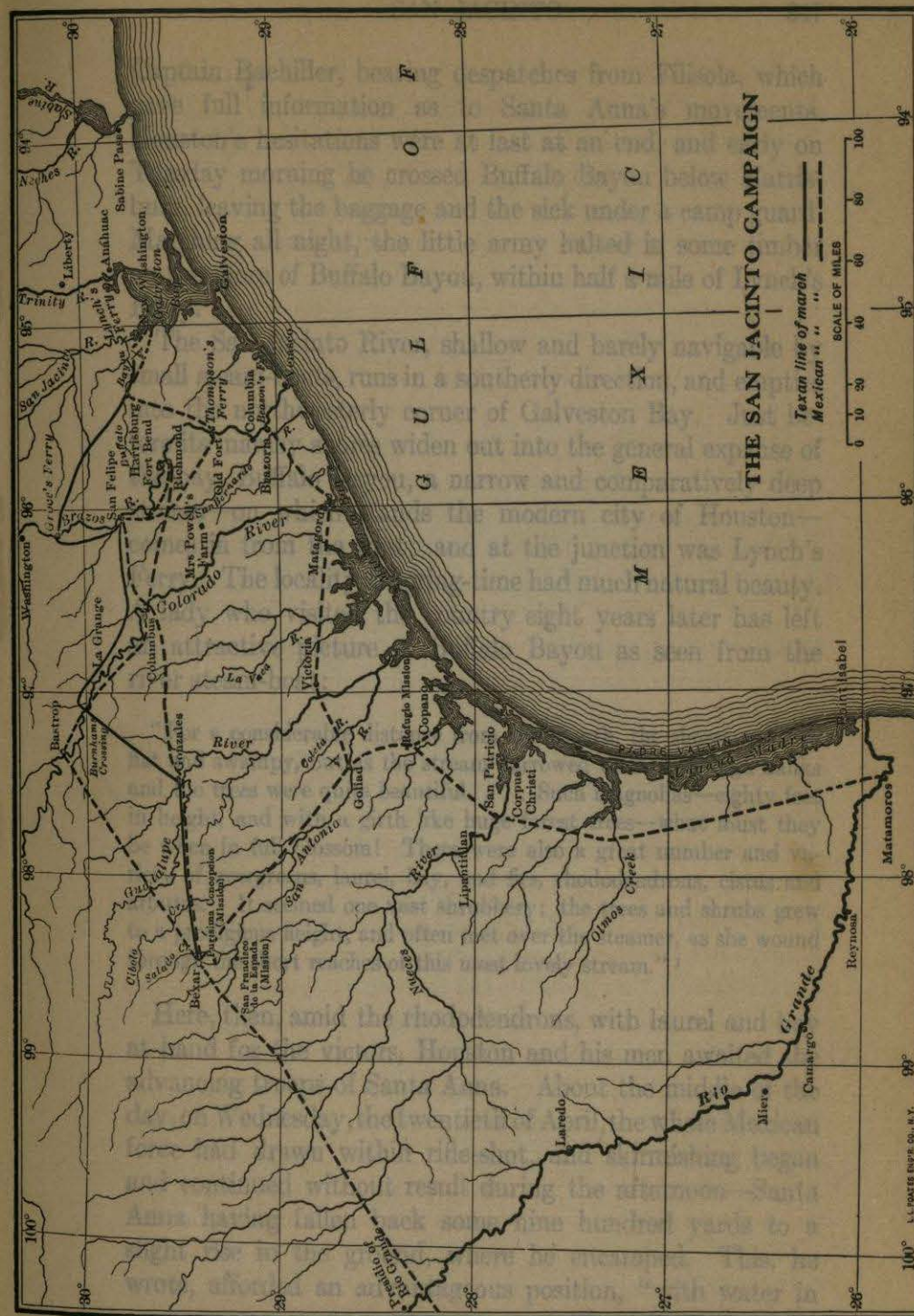
What Houston's plans were, if indeed he had any definite plans, he divulged to nobody; and when the eastward march was begun the army were in doubt as to whether they were not to fall back as far as Nacogdoches. About twenty miles east of the Brazos the road forked. The left-hand branch led to Nacogdoches, the right-hand branch to Harrisburg.

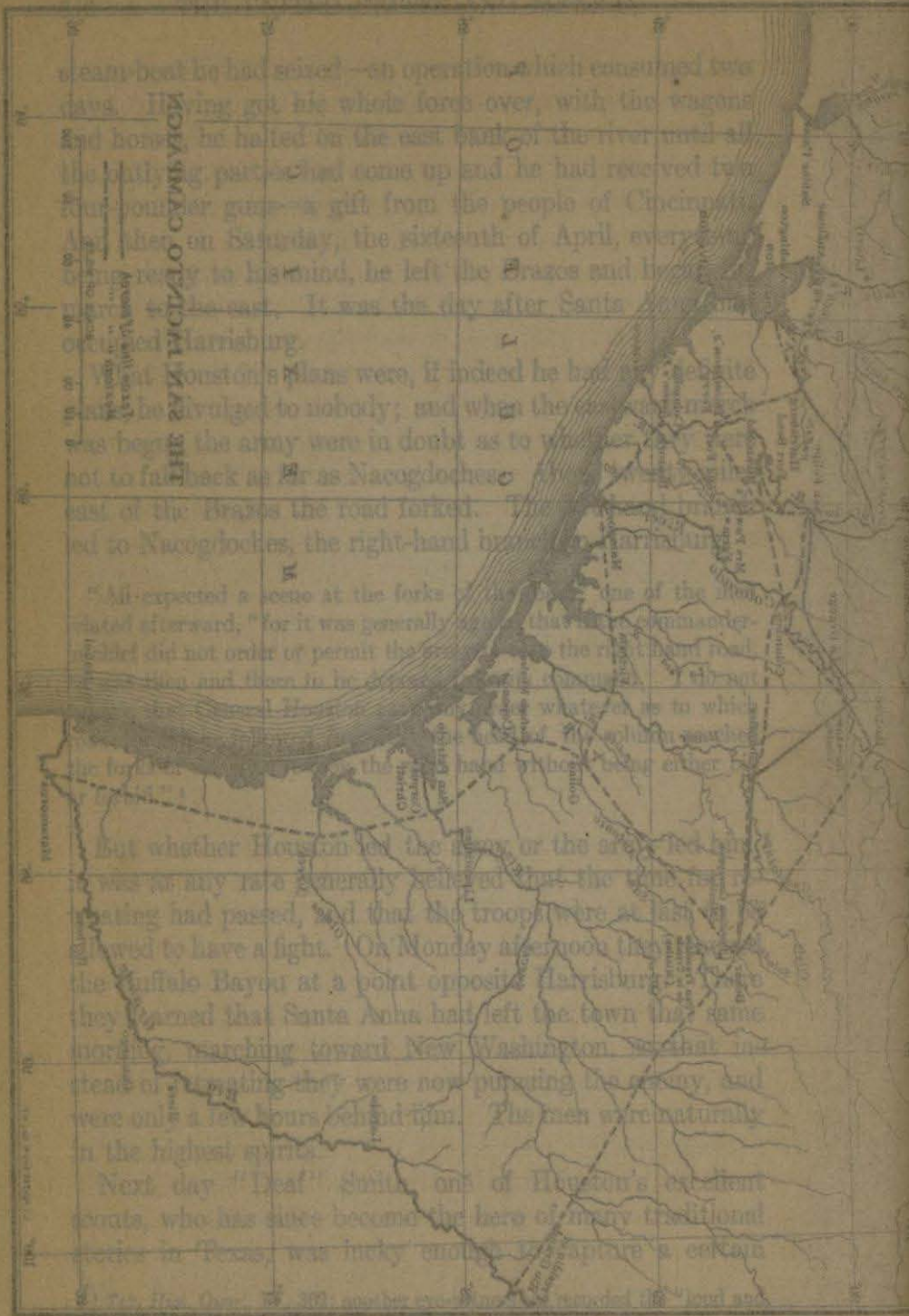
"All expected a scene at the forks of the road," one of the men related afterward, "for it was generally agreed that if the commander-in-chief did not order or permit the army to take the right hand road, he was then and there to be deposed from its command. I do not believe that General Houston gave any order whatever as to which road should be followed, but when the head of the column reached the forks of the road it took the right hand without being either bid or forbid."¹

But whether Houston led the army or the army led him, it was at any rate generally believed that the time for retreating had passed, and that the troops were at last to be allowed to have a fight. On Monday afternoon they reached the Buffalo Bayou at a point opposite Harrisburg. There they learned that Santa Anna had left the town that same morning, marching toward New Washington, so that instead of retreating they were now pursuing the enemy, and were only a few hours behind him. The men were naturally in the highest spirits.

Next day "Deaf" Smith, one of Houston's excellent scouts, who has since become the hero of many traditional stories in Texas, was lucky enough to capture a certain

¹ *Tex. Hist. Quar.*, IV, 302; another eye-witness has recorded the "loud and joyous shouts" which greeted the turn to the right.—(*Ibid.*, 313.)





Captain Bachiller, bearing despatches from Filisola, which gave full information as to Santa Anna's movements. Houston's hesitations were at last at an end, and early on Tuesday morning he crossed Buffalo Bayou below Harrisburg, leaving the baggage and the sick under a camp guard. Marching all night, the little army halted in some timber on the shore of Buffalo Bayou, within half a mile of Lynch's Ferry.

The San Jacinto River, shallow and barely navigable by small steam-boats, runs in a southerly direction, and empties into the northwesterly corner of Galveston Bay. Just before its marshy shores widen out into the general expanse of the bay, Buffalo Bayou, a narrow and comparatively deep stream—on which stands the modern city of Houston—comes in from the west; and at the junction was Lynch's Ferry. The locality in spring-time had much natural beauty. A lady who visited the country eight years later has left an attractive picture of Buffalo Bayou as seen from the river steam-boat:

"For a considerable distance from the mouth, the shores are low, flat and swampy, but as the stream narrowed there were high banks and the trees were quite beautiful. . . . Such magnolias—eighty feet in height, and with a girth like huge forest trees—what must they be when in full blossom! There were also a great number and variety of evergreens, laurel, bay, and firs, rhododendrons, cistus and arbutus. It seemed one vast shrubbery; the trees and shrubs grew to a prodigious height, and often met over the steamer, as she wound through the short reaches of this most lovely stream."¹

Here, then, amid the rhododendrons, with laurel and bay at hand for the victors, Houston and his men awaited the advancing troops of Santa Anna. About the middle of the day, on Wednesday, the twentieth of April, the whole Mexican force had drawn within rifle-shot, and skirmishing began and continued without result during the afternoon—Santa Anna having fallen back some nine hundred yards to a slight rise in the ground, where he encamped. This, he wrote, afforded an advantageous position, "with water in

¹ Mrs. Houston, *Texas and the Gulf of Mexico*, II, 181.

the rear, a thick wood on the right down to the banks of the San Jacinto, a broad plain on the left, and open ground in front."¹ It was not quite open, for there were some clumps of trees; but in the main there was a level prairie in front and on his left.

During the night he occupied himself in strengthening his position. A sort of breastwork made by piling up the packs and baggage secured the more or less exposed left of the line, which was further strengthened by the one gun which Santa Anna had brought with him and by the whole of his cavalry.

Houston had stood pretty much on the defensive all day Wednesday, and he did not venture a night attack—a course for which he was afterward severely criticised; and indeed it is hard to understand why, with a superiority, or at least an equality in numbers, he should have delayed his attack when he was aware that within a few hours the Mexicans must certainly receive considerable reinforcements. At nine o'clock on Thursday morning General Cos arrived, after a rapid march from the Brazos. He had started with five hundred men, according to orders; but he only brought four hundred with him into camp, the rest having been left near Harrisburg as an escort for the supply-train.

Houston still held his ground, very likely expecting that he would be attacked; but at half past three in the afternoon, no attack having been made, he ordered his men to be paraded, having, as he reported, ordered a bridge about eight miles off, on the only road leading to the river Brazos, to be destroyed.² Protected by the woods along Buffalo Bayou, the Texans were mustered without attracting the enemy's attention, and when all was ready moved quietly forward until they emerged from the wood, and then made a rush for the Mexican line.

¹ Santa Anna's *Manifesto*, 64. A swamp behind and a wood close by, affording cover for the enemy's active scouts, would probably not have been considered an advantageous position by most commanding officers.

² "Deaf" Smith burned this bridge which crossed Vince's Creek, a tributary of Buffalo Bayou. There was some controversy afterward as to whether Houston ordered it destroyed or whether Smith did so on his own responsibility.

"Our cavalry," to quote from Houston's official report, "was first despatched to the front of the enemy's left, for the purpose of attracting their notice, while an extensive island of timber afforded us an opportunity of concentrating our forces and deploying from that point, agreeably to the previous design of the troops. Every evolution was performed with alacrity, the whole advancing rapidly in line, through an open prairie without any protection whatever for our men."¹

The Mexican camp was entirely unguarded. Apparently every ordinary precaution had been neglected. The horses were unsaddled, the men were cooking or eating, and Santa Anna himself was taking a siesta. Before the Mexican line could be formed the Texans were upon them. "The enemy," reported Santa Anna, "continued their rapid charge with tremendous shouts (*"descompasados gritos"*), and in a few minutes gained such a victory as could not have been imagined."² Santa Anna, however, did not choose to relate what these shouts were. The Texans, as they came over the breastwork, were yelling at the top of their voices: "*Remember Goliad!*" "*Remember Tampico!*" "*Remember the Alamo!*"

The action, if that may be so called which was nothing but a fierce rush by the Texans and a headlong flight by the Mexicans, was very quickly over.

"The conflict in the breastwork," to quote Houston's report again, "lasted but a few moments; many of the troops encountered hand to hand, and, not having the advantage of bayonets on our side, our riflemen used their pieces as war-clubs, breaking many of them off at the breech. The rout commenced at half past four and the pursuit by the main army continued until twilight."³

"Such slaughter on one side, and such almost miraculous preservation on the other," wrote another participant in the battle on the day after the event, "have never been heard of since the invention of gunpowder."⁴

¹ Houston to the President of Texas, April 25, 1836; Yoakum, II, 500.

² Santa Anna to the Secretary of War, March 11, 1837; in his *Manifesto*, 67.

³ Yoakum, II, 501.

⁴ Letter of Capt. Tarlton, April 22, 1836; Kennedy, II, 228.