

back about twelve miles to the hacienda of Buena Vista. The most probable explanation of this decision was his fear for the safety of his stores at Saltillo, which were threatened by Miñon's wide turning movement. On the afternoon of Sunday, February 21, therefore, just as Santa Anna's men were starting from La Encarnacion, Taylor began his retreat from Agua Nueva. A considerable quantity of supplies had been collected at that point, and during the afternoon and evening everything was removed that could be carried off, Colonel Yell, with the Arkansas mounted volunteers, being left behind to protect the remaining stores as far as possible. Shortly after midnight Yell's advanced pickets were driven in, and he gave orders to set fire to the buildings of the hacienda and the stacks of grain, while the remaining wagons of the transport train moved off "with furious speed" for Buena Vista. Yell's cavalry (which had previously been reinforced by part of the regular dragoons and part of the Kentucky mounted volunteers) fell back in good order, reaching Buena Vista at daybreak on the morning of Monday, February 22.<sup>1</sup>

Santa Anna had confidently expected, from the information he received, to find Taylor in force at Agua Nueva, and he was evidently much surprised to find, on arriving near that point, that the American army had fallen back hastily and apparently in disorder. His orders to General Miñon were to fall upon Taylor's communications with Saltillo, and he therefore expected, by a rapid movement, to bring the American army speedily to bay. Santa Anna accordingly pushed forward without hesitation.

"Without giving the troops time," says Balbontin, "to get a drink of water or to fill their canteens, he compelled them to continue their advance at the double quick. He sent forward the whole of the cavalry at a gallop, on the right of the column, to support the vanguard in its pursuit of the enemy which he believed to be completely demoralized and in full retreat. Indeed he might well have believed this on seeing the road dotted with pieces of harness, and four or five

<sup>1</sup> Carleton's *Battle of Buena Vista*, 11-26. The author was an officer of the dragoons and an eye-witness of the scenes he described.

wagons abandoned at different places. The enemy however had taken possession of the hacienda of Buena Vista and the pass of the Angostura, which had no doubt been previously reconnoitred, and where he waited with the utmost tranquillity."<sup>1</sup>

It was at eleven o'clock in the morning when Santa Anna with the advance of his army came in sight of Taylor's waiting troops, and he at once sent a flag to the American camp with a letter calling upon Taylor to surrender, as he was surrounded by a force of twenty thousand men.

To this letter Taylor returned the following laconic reply:

"Sir:

"In reply to your note of this date, summoning me to surrender my forces at discretion, I beg leave to say that I decline acceding to your request."

Santa Anna, however, did not immediately attack, but waited until the arrival of the rest of his army late in the afternoon, when he pushed forward some light troops in an effort to gain the left of the American position.

The hacienda of Buena Vista (more correctly San Juan de la Buena Vista) lies about five miles south of the city of Saltillo, and derives its name from the extensive view there obtained of the surrounding scenery. Saltillo itself, a city of several thousand inhabitants and the seat of a bishop, lies in the heart of the Sierra Madre Mountains, about five thousand feet above the sea. It is situated at the southern end of an extensive plain, bounded on every side by jagged mountains or hills, which rise to perhaps as much as two thousand feet above the general level. Immediately at the southern edge of the town there appears a range of low hills two or three hundred feet high; but these do not fall off again on their southern side, being in fact the northern extremity of a plateau which extends for some distance southerly. Right and left this plateau is bounded by mountains of considerable height, which approach each other to within about a mile and a half, a little south of Buena Vista. There is therefore a level valley, varying from a

<sup>1</sup> Balbontin, *Invasion Americana*, 71.

mile and a half, at its narrowest point, to four miles in width, and having a farm called the rancho of La Encantada at its southern extremity and the city of Saltillo at the foot of the declivity, by which the valley abruptly terminates to the north.

From La Encantada a small stream of water finds its way northerly through the pass to Saltillo, keeping close to the mountains on the western side, but leaving room for a belt of irrigated fields. In February the little stream runs almost entirely dry, but the trees along its border give a touch of verdure to the prevailing dusty brown of the landscape. West of these fields the foot-hills rise very abruptly to a height of perhaps two or three hundred feet, and then the land slopes back to the high mountains. East of the stream is an irregular line of bluffs, forming the edge of a plateau which lies sixty or seventy feet above, there being barely room for a road between the stream and the bluffs which terminate the plateau. The plateau itself slopes with a very regular and gradual ascent to the base of the mountains on the easterly side of the valley. Its barren and stony surface is unfit for cultivation, and only a few straggling mesquite shrubs diversify its surface.

The hacienda of Buena Vista was a collection of adobe buildings, with the usual flat roofs and thick walls, laid out in regular streets, and capable of effective defence against troops unprovided with artillery. South of the hacienda, for some distance, the plateau is intersected by a remarkable series of ravines or barrancas, which cross it diagonally from southeast to northwest. These ravines have, of course, been formed by the torrents of water descending from the easterly mountains in the rainy season; and in a country where frost plays no part in forming the landscape, the walls of the ravines are cut sharply through the gravelly soil, and in many places stand almost perpendicular. The sides of the ravines, even near the mountains, are higher than a man's head, and, except at a few places, present almost insuperable obstacles to the movements of field artillery and great difficulties to the movements of cavalry. Near the

stream the ravines, of course, become deeper and more difficult. The only available route for Santa Anna's artillery lay, therefore, along the main road which followed closely the course of the stream; but for infantry and cavalry it was possible to advance by keeping close along the foot of the mountains near the head of the ravines.

The narrowest point in the little depressed valley, which the main stream has worn for itself between the plateau on the east and the foot-hills on the west, is called by Mexican historians La Angostura—the narrows.<sup>1</sup> West and south of the road at this point the stream had worn a series of deep channels, forming a net-work of gullies which extended across nearly the whole of the lower level to the foot-hills on the west, and presented a formidable obstacle to the progress of troops of any description whatever—"being upwards of twenty feet in depth, with sides so precipitous as to prevent their being ascended, except at two narrow places, without the assistance of scaling ladders."<sup>2</sup> At this point Captain Washington, with eight guns, was stationed, effectually commanding the approach by the road.

Just to the left of the battery at La Angostura the bluff forming the edge of the plateau extended out northwesterly, making a sort of promontory with very steep sides, about the base of which ran the road. This promontory commanded the road toward the south for a considerable distance. It was occupied by the first regiment of Illinois volunteers, supporting Washington's battery. On their left came the second Illinois regiment, two companies of dragoons and McCulloch's company of Texan volunteers. In the rear of the battery, on the road, was the second Kentucky regiment, and on the extreme right, near the mountains, were the Arkansas and Kentucky regiments of mounted volunteers. The American advanced line, therefore, was formed to the right and left of Washington's battery, which was regarded as holding the key to the position.

<sup>1</sup>This name seems to have been invented by members of Santa Anna's army. The local name of the spot is El Chupadero.

<sup>2</sup>Carleton, 8.

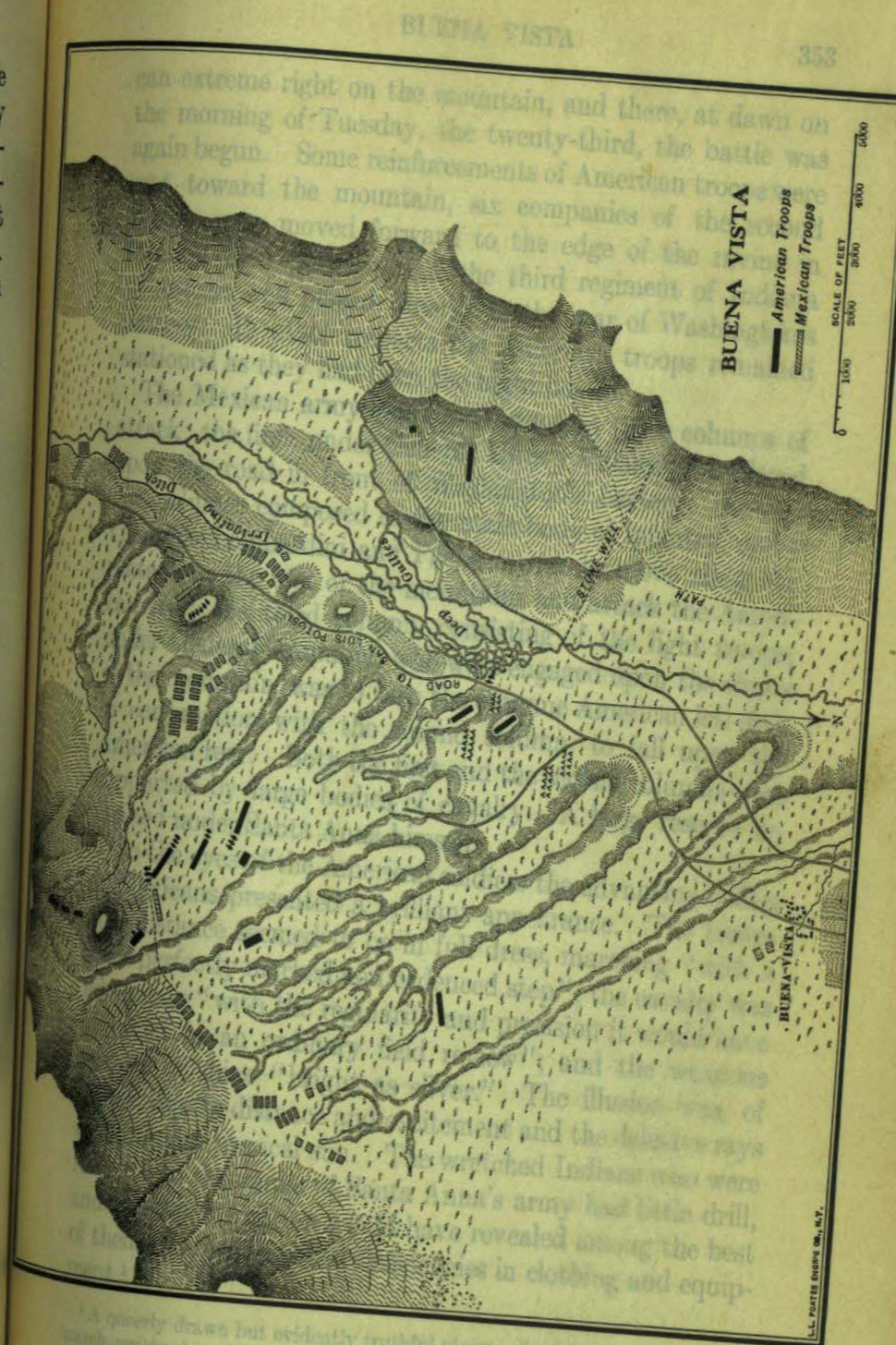
In the rear of the troops, on the plateau, ran one of the widest of the ravines that crossed it; and on the northerly side of this ravine were stationed the remaining troops, consisting of two regiments of Indiana volunteers, the Mississippi Rifles, two squadrons of dragoons, and the light batteries of Captains W. T. Sherman and Braxton Bragg. There was a wide interval between the American troops on the left and the foot of the easterly mountains.

As the Mexican infantry came up, they were formed in two lines upon the plateau east of the road, with the exception of one battalion which took possession of a hill west of the stream. They had made an extraordinary march of nearly fifty miles in twenty-four hours, and had had little to eat or drink during that period.

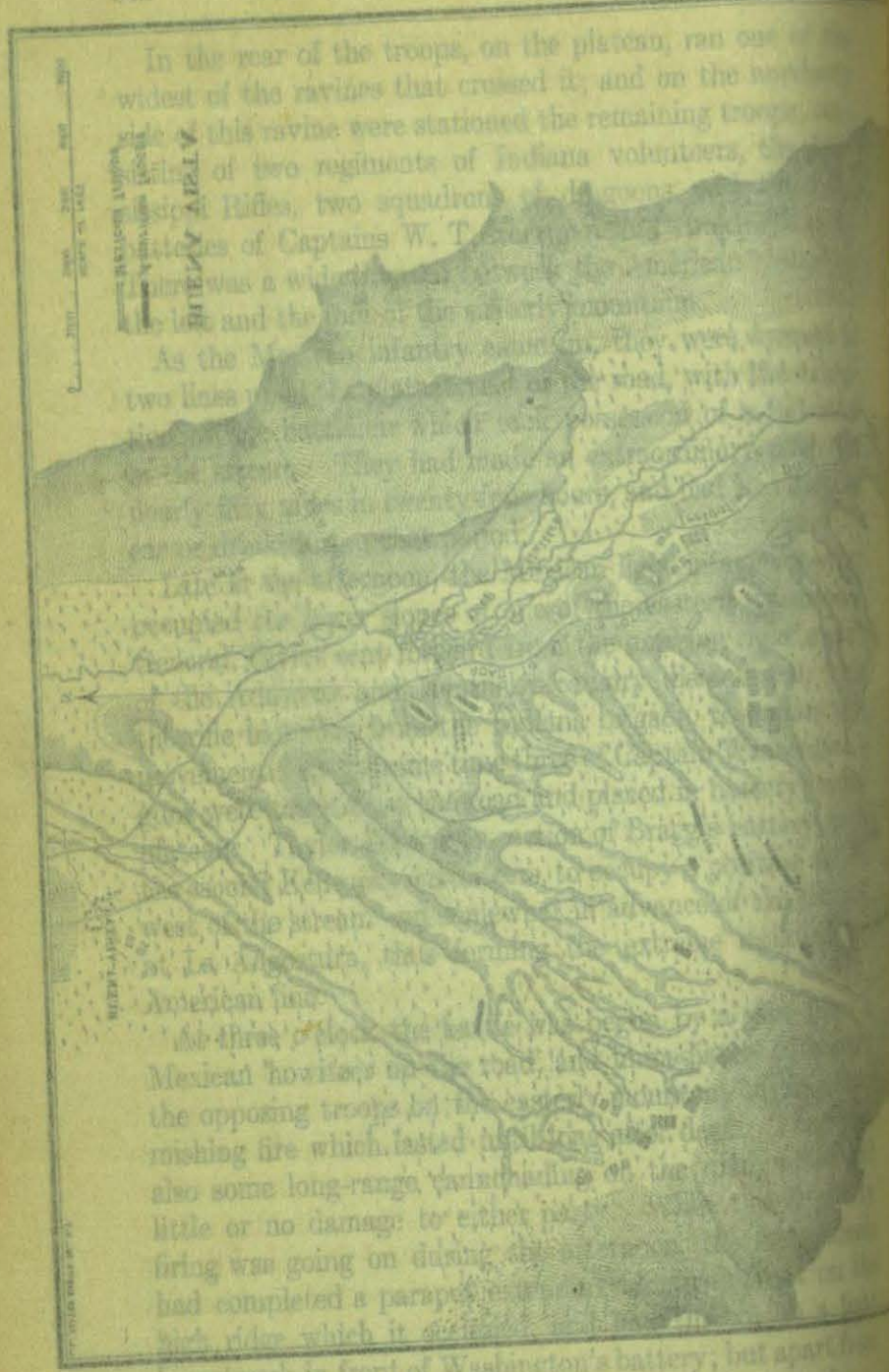
Late in the afternoon, the Mexican light infantry having occupied the lower slopes of one of the eastern mountains, General Taylor sent forward from the extreme right a part of the Arkansas and Kentucky cavalry dismounted, with the rifle battalion from the Indiana brigade, to oppose this movement. At the same time three of Captain Washington's guns were taken from the road and placed in battery on the plateau. Taylor also sent a section of Bragg's battery, with the second Kentucky volunteers, to occupy a position on the west of the stream and somewhat in advance of the battery at La Angostura, thus forming the extreme right of the American line.

At three o'clock the battle was begun by a shot from a Mexican howitzer on the road, and immediately afterward the opposing troops on the easterly mountain began a skirmishing fire which lasted until long after dark. There was also some long-range cannonading on the road, which did little or no damage to either party. While this desultory firing was going on during the afternoon, the first Illinois had completed a parapet extending along its front on the high ridge which it occupied, and had thrown up a light breastwork in front of Washington's battery; but apart from this no effort at intrenchment seems to have been made.

During the night reinforcements were sent to the Mexi-



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In the rear of the troops, on the plateau, ran one of the widest of the ravines that crossed it; and on the north side of this ravine were stationed the remaining troops, consisting of two regiments of Indiana volunteers, the 1st and 2d Regiments of Rifles, two squadrons of Cavalry, and a battery of Captains W. T. ... As the Mexican army advanced, with two lines ...

The Mexican army was now formed in three columns of attack: the first, under General Mora y Villamil, was placed upon the road in front of Washington's battery; the second column, composed of the main body of infantry, under Generals Lombardini and Pacheco, was to move along the plateau at the foot of the mountains and attack the American left; the third column, consisting of the light troops, under General Ampudia, who were engaged upon the slopes of the mountain, was to turn the extreme American left and, in conjunction with the second column, to fall upon the American rear. Both the first and the second columns were supported by large bodies of cavalry. A large reserve remained under Santa Anna himself.

To the eyes of the American soldiers the advancing bodies of Mexicans presented a brilliant appearance. The troops at a distance seemed to be in full dress, marching "with a most perfectly marked and cadenced step"; the cavalry was advancing "with the regularity and precision it would have observed in an ordinary field review"; and the weapons seemed to shine "bright as silver." The illusion was, of course, due to distance and excitement and the delusive rays of an almost tropical sun. The wretched Indians who were forced into the ranks of Santa Anna's army had little drill, and a closer inspection would have revealed among the best of them the most marked deficiencies in clothing and equipment.<sup>1</sup>

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can extreme right on the mountain, and there, at dawn on the morning of Tuesday, the twenty-third, the battle was again begun. Some reinforcements of American troops were sent toward the mountain, six companies of the second Illinois were moved forward to the edge of the ravine in front of their position, and the third regiment of Indiana volunteers was placed directly in the rear of Washington's battery. In other respects the American troops remained stationed as they had been the night before.

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By this time it was nine o'clock in the morning, and General Lane, of the Indiana troops, commanding on the left, pushed forward the three pieces of artillery which were stationed near the foot of the mountains, with the second Indiana in support, to within two hundred yards of the advancing Mexican lines. For twenty-five minutes an unequal contest was carried on, but at last the volunteers gave way and the commander of the battery had to order a retreat, being compelled, moreover, to abandon one of his pieces after every man and horse belonging to it had either been killed or disabled.

The Mexican loss at this point seems to have been extremely heavy, but as the advanced American troops fell back the whole of the second and third Mexican columns united, advanced, and came into action. They were immediately opened upon by two guns of Captain T. W. Sherman's battery: one under Lieutenant George H. Thomas and the other under Lieutenant Samuel G. French. The other two guns of the battery, under Captain Sherman himself and Lieutenant John F. Reynolds, remained in reserve, supported by the second Illinois, who held their ground firmly until out-flanked on the left by the masses of the Mexican troops.

While this was going on, the first division of the Mexican troops came within range of Washington's battery, on the road, which at once opened upon their masses, and in a few minutes, by the rapidity and accuracy of its fire, compelled them to seek refuge in the mouths of the adjacent ravines, where they remained inactive during the remainder of the day.

It had by this time become apparent to every one that the main stress of the battle would be upon the American left, and the section of Sherman's battery which had not yet been engaged was ordered forward, while Bragg's battery and the second Kentucky infantry, on the west side of the valley, were brought back across the stream, from the right to the left of the American position. There were now seven

official communication from the acting Minister of War to Congress, dated Jan. 28, 1847; and a four weeks' march, in February, through two hundred and forty dusty miles of one of the barrenest parts of Mexico, must have reduced them almost to rags. See *Apelacion al buen Criterio*, App., 175.

American guns engaged on the southerly part of the plateau, supported by a handful of dragoons, with the second Kentucky and the Illinois regiments. The whole had been forced back into a line at right angles to that originally occupied, facing the easterly mountains, along the base of which nearly the whole of the Mexican army was pouring northwardly.

The left of the American position had thus been completely turned, and their skirmishers on the mountain were apparently cut off from the rest of the American troops. But as soon as they discovered that the head of the Mexican columns had interposed between them and their friends, they immediately abandoned their position and succeeded in forcing their way around the head of the intercepting column below, which for a time was held in check by the artillery and the Arkansas and Kentucky cavalry. The latter, however, suffered very heavy loss. The retreating skirmishers were pursued down the mountain by Ampudia's men, who had climbed up to the very top, and the whole American force near the foot of the mountain fell back in disorder.

About the time of this disaster General Taylor arrived on the field from Saltillo, where he had gone the night before to provide for the safety of his stores and to make arrangements for the small garrison which had been left there to guard them. He found the American line above the road facing the mountains to the east, the extreme left being now formed by the Mississippi regiment near the hacienda of Buena Vista and two companies of the second United States dragoons who had formed Taylor's escort. The heads of the ravines near the mountains having been turned or crossed at their shallowest part, the American army had lost nearly all the natural advantages of the ground.

The Mississippi regiment, moving forward on the left, soon came in contact with the head of the Mexican columns. The steadiness of the Mississippians and the superior quality of their weapons quickly checked the Mexican advance and then in a few moments turned it back. As the Mexican infantry wavered, the Mississippians were joined by the third