

## CHAPTER IX.

BEFORE reveille on the morning of the 3d of May, 1846, the heavy, booming sound of cannon came rolling in from the direction of the fort, opposite Matamoras. The camp was wild with excitement; we knew our gallant fellows were resisting a bombardment, and all were anxious to fly to their rescue. Captain Walker, on a scout last evening, after taking a survey of the enemy's camp, fell in with their picket guard and fired upon them. He reports the enemy in force, and evidently awaiting our return. We were under orders to march at 1 P.M., but the general changed his mind, and decided upon communicating with the fort. Captain May, with a command of Dragoons, was ordered to accompany Captain Walker (who was selected by the general to carry his communication to the fort) as far as the edge of the chaparral, and, if he did not return before morning, to wait no longer, but return to the Point. We were kept in a constant state of excitement; the firing continuing at intervals the whole day.

On the morning of the 4th Captain May returned, having waited as long as he deemed it prudent for Captain Walker. He reports fresh signs of the enemy. Early in the morning we had an exciting *scare*: the cry was the "enemy are advancing." The long roll was beaten, troops paraded, and immediately marched out to meet them. The enemy was Captain May and his command. The 1st Brigade, which was encamped two miles in advance of the Point, after the alarm

moved to our present camp, situated on an extensive flat running along the bay. Active preparations are making for our return march, and for leaving *Fort Polk* in a defensible state.

Captain Walker returned on the 5th, and brought the cheering intelligence that all was well at the fort. The batteries from the city were opened upon the fort at daybreak of the 3d. In thirty minutes all fires from the heavy gun batteries were silenced by the superior skill of our artillerists. The enemy have continued throwing shells, but with trifling effect. The reception of such good news put us in the very best spirits. Captain Walker ran a great many risks making his way to the fort, and deserves great credit for the fearless manner in which he effected the communication. The heavy report of artillery throughout the day announces the bombardment in continuance. Little was done on the 6th but to make preparations for the coming march. On the 7th, General Taylor issued the following order:

Headquarters, Army of Occupation, }  
May 7, 1846.

*Order No. 58.*

The army will march to-day at 3 o'clock, in the direction of Matamoras. It is known the enemy has recently occupied the route in force. If still in possession, the general will give him battle. The commanding general has every confidence in his officers and men. If his orders and instructions are carried out, he has no doubt of the result, let the enemy meet him in what numbers they may. He wishes to enjoin upon the battalions of Infantry that their main dependence must be in the bayonet.

Signed,

W. W. S. BLISS,  
Assistant Adjutant-general.



The order, in advance, announced a victory. There was no doubt expressed in it. Commanding a much inferior force, composed of troops few of whom have ever "smelt gunpowder," our brave general, nevertheless, speaks to them as to old veterans. *He wishes the Infantry to recollect their main dependence must be in the bayonet.* That sentence alone shows the man; in it you see confidence, and a determination to win the battle at all hazards. The army marches at 3 P.M., having in company an immense train, rich, not only in subsistence, but in munitions of war. In the wagons there were six twelve-pounders. There was also with us a battery of two eighteen-pounders drawn by oxen, the command of which was assigned to Lieutenant Churchill, of the Artillery. We marched five miles and encamped.

Early on the morning of the 8th our scouts under Captain Walker reported the camp of the enemy deserted. From that it was generally believed they would decline battle. The march was resumed shortly after sunrise. Upon our arrival within a short distance of our last camp, previous to our reaching the Rio Grande, the advance reported the enemy in force. Debouching from a point of mesquite, the masses of the enemy were apparent, less than a mile distant, and occupying a front of nearly a mile and a half. The general immediately had his command formed in column of attack, and with the greatest deliberation ordered arms, and permitted the men, half at a time, to go and get water to fill their canteens. We had already marched twelve miles, the day was very warm, and we had suffered from the want of water. As soon as the men had refreshed themselves, the command was formed, and marched steadily to meet the









enemy, with as much regularity and coolness as if on drill. Two squadrons of Dragoons were at first in advance, but, after the battle commenced, were employed either gallantly supporting the batteries, or defending the train. When within seven hundred yards, the enemy opened their fire from a battery on their right. The column was halted, and deployed with the utmost precision, except the 8th Infantry, which remained in column during the action.

The following was the order of our line of battle: The right wing, commanded by Colonel Twiggs, was composed of the 5th Infantry on the right, Ringgold's Artillery, the 3d Infantry, Churchill's eighteen-pound battery, and 4th Infantry. Left wing, commanded by Brevet Lieutenant-colonel Belknap, composed of Duncan's Artillery—the Artillery companies serving as Infantry—and the 8th Infantry. Ringgold's and Duncan's batteries were immediately advanced and opened their fires. The firing of the enemy was incessant, although not very accurate. The enemy's line of battle was along and in advance of the chaparral. Their cavalry (Lancers) were on the left, then a battery, then masses of Infantry, then a battery, masses of Infantry, another battery, and again masses of Infantry. Their position had been deliberately assumed, knowing where we would pass the road. The fire of the gallant Ringgold's battery on our right told with deadly effect upon their mass of Cavalry; platoons appeared to be mowed down at a time. The two eighteen-pounders carried death and destruction with them. The Cavalry soon found it was getting too warm for them, and commenced moving off, by a flank movement, to the left in a trot, and were *tickled* into a gallop by a discharge of the eighteens. Their flank move-



ment threatened our train, and was promptly met by the movement of a section of Ringgold's battery under Lieutenant Ridgely, the 5th and 3d Infantry. The strength of this body of Cavalry was computed at one thousand, and, therefore, was a formidable demonstration. The 5th received them in square, and from the fire of an angle vacated twenty saddles. Some of them still passed on, until they saw the 3d advancing in column by division, when they rapidly retreated. Lieutenant Ridgely performed excellent service with his pieces. He aimed and fired a shell, which struck a lancer about the middle, which exploded simultaneously with the blow, making one mangled mass of horse and rider. Thus the battle progressed on our right. On the left, the gallant Duncan was pouring in a most destructive fire. Each shot seemed to take effect, and as our men saw the execution, their cries of triumph mingled with the cannon's roar. The fire of the enemy upon our left was more galling; the 8th Infantry, particularly, suffered, having been kept in column, instead of being deployed in line. The Regiments of Artillery and Infantry, and squadrons of Dragoons, stood firm as veterans, ready to support our batteries. The prairie took fire, and the burning of the long, rank grass sent up columns of smoke, which at times concealed the opposing forces. The cannonading commenced at 3 P.M., and ceased for a short time at 4 P.M.

In the mean time, a masterly movement to the right, to outflank the enemy, was being executed. Ringgold's battery and the eighteen-pounders were pushed forward toward the left flank of the enemy. The 4th Infantry and 1st Brigade moved up to their support. As soon as the firing recommenced, the enemy were

forced to change their line of battle. Lieutenant Duncan, under cover of the smoke, conceived and executed a brilliant flank movement on the enemy's right. He advanced with his battery, and suddenly debouched and poured in a galling enfilading fire upon their right flank; it was thrown into the utmost confusion. His shells and shrapnell shot told with murderous effect. At this moment, if a charge had been made, so great was the confusion of the enemy, the whole field would have been swept; but the general felt bound to protect his train, and feared any movement which would have laid it open to an attack. As night approached the fire of the enemy slackened, and it ceased on both sides with the setting sun. We had driven the enemy from his position, and forced him to retire. We encamped as victors upon the field of battle. The last rays of the setting sun tinged with a golden light the clouds of battle that hung heavily over the field of carnage; the weary army rested on their arms, and slept sweetly on the prairie grass. Our loss was wonderfully small. Nine killed, forty-four wounded, and two missing. Major Ringgold, Captain Page, Lieutenants Luther, 2d Artillery, and Wallen, 4th Infantry, were wounded. Major Ringgold received a shot while seated on his horse, which carried away the flesh on his legs from his knees up, and passed through the withers of his thorough-bred charger, "David Branch;" Captain Page had his lower jaw shot off; Lieutenant Luther was wounded in the calf of the leg, and Lieutenant Wallen very slightly in the arm; Captain Bliss, assistant adjutant-general, had his horse shot under him; likewise Lieutenant Daniels of the 2d Artillery. The wounds of the men were very severe, most of them requiring amputation of some limb. The sur-



geon's saw was going the livelong night, and the groans of the poor sufferers were heart-rending. Too much praise can not be bestowed upon our medical officers for their devotion and prompt action. It was a sad duty for them. The enemy, commanded by General Arista, were six thousand strong; we were two thousand two hundred and eleven; only the difference of three thousand one hundred and one, and they in a selected position. Singular to relate, the battle of Palo Alto (tall timber) was fought on the spot which General Taylor predicted when he first passed over the ground.

At daybreak on the 9th the enemy were seen moving along the edge of the chaparral toward the road, and the prevailing impression was that they intended occupying the road in force, and disputing our further progress. The general determining to advance and attack, decided to park the train, throwing up a temporary breastwork, and mounting some of the twelve-pounders for its defense. Shortly after sunrise the army was again formed in line of battle, and marched forward. The wounded were left behind to be sent to Point Isabel. The Dragoons and Captain Walker's company of Volunteers, thrown out in advance, soon returned and reported the chaparral free, and the enemy in full retreat along the road. The army was halted near a pond, and General Taylor rode back to the train to send off his first bulletin, to cheer the desponding at home, and to awaken American glory and patriotism. While there, Lieutenant Blake, of the topographical corps, accidentally shot himself. It was a sad occurrence; he had behaved with distinguished gallantry on the 8th. I took advantage of the halt to go over the field of battle. It was truly a shocking

sight; our Artillery had literally *mowed* them down. There were heaps of dead lying hither and yon, with the most ghastly wounds I ever saw; some had died with a smile on their countenance; others, in the agony of death, with a fierce convulsive struggle had caught at the rank grass, and died with their hands clinched firmly in it, looking defiance at the enemy. It was a shocking picture. The number killed could not be accurately ascertained, but of killed and wounded we are safe in claiming five hundred. The great disproportion in the loss of the two armies arose from this fact: *we fired at their masses; they at our batteries!* The prisoners taken acknowledge they were badly whipped, and confirm us in the belief of the strength of their army.

As we were advancing we came across a poor fellow who was wounded, and who, without a drop of water, had passed the night upon the battle-field. He gave us to understand he wanted bread and water. Colonel Twiggs exclaimed, "Men, give this poor fellow something to eat and drink." In an instant the haversacks and canteens of a company were at his service. Such acts of generosity threw a flickering sunbeam over the deep shades of the battle-field. On the field was found a dog lying by the dead body of his master; no entreaties could prevail upon him to leave the body of him who in life had caressed him. General Taylor ordered out parties in every direction to search for the wounded of the enemy, had them brought in, and attended to with the same care as our men.

About 1 P.M. the army resumed its march. When we first halted, Captain G. A. McCall had been sent in advance, with one hundred picked men, to scour the



chaparral and watch the progress of the enemy. Captain C. F. Smith, of the Artillery, with his battalion of light companies of the 1st Brigade, followed. We proceeded through the chaparral to within three miles of the fort, when word was passed to the rear that the enemy were in force, and in a selected position. The advance under Captain McCall had discovered them, and after a spirited brush, retired, agreeably to orders, to await the arrival of the main body. There was not a moment's hesitation; our brave general determined to give them immediate battle. Our troops filed past the train, and deployed as skirmishers to the right and left of the road. Captain McCall's command was ordered by the general "to advance and draw the fire of the enemy." Nobly did they perform that terrible service.

The enemy occupying the opposite bank of a ravine, concave toward us, had planted their batteries to rake the road, and every approach (few in number) through the almost impenetrable chaparral. The fire of the enemy was drawn by the advance. Lieutenant Ridgely, fit successor to the gallant Ringgold, was ordered forward with his battery. The struggle for victory then commenced. The Artillery of the enemy swept the ground with their grape and cannister; Lieutenant Ridgely returned it with murderous effect. Masses of their Infantry, lining the banks of the ravine, and pressed forward into the chaparral, were met by our skirmishers on the left with a gallantry and determination, on both sides, rarely equaled. Repeatedly were bayonets crossed, the enemy giving way slowly, and fighting for every inch of the ground. The 4th, 5th, 8th, and part of the 3d were on the left, and engaged in this sanguinary struggle. Owing to the dense chaparral



