

## CHAPTER II

### THE YOUNG SOLDIER

HAVING taken the silver dollar from the head of the drum, which was the recognized token of enlistment in those days, and put on a uniform, Houston was made a sergeant the same day, and marched with his detachment to join the Thirty-ninth Regiment, Tennessee Volunteers. He was stationed with his regiment at various cantonments in Alabama and Tennessee, and by his active zeal and devotion to duty acquired the reputation of being the best drill officer in the command. He was, however, not left long in the ranks. His friends made application to President Madison for an appointment, and he received a commission as ensign, which reached him while the regiment was stationed at Knoxville.

It was the period of the Creek war. That powerful tribe had been aroused by the eloquence of Tecumseh and his brother, the Prophet, as well as by the sense of the constant aggression of the whites, and the knowledge that only a desperate struggle could save them from being crowded out of their lands and home. They broke out into a sudden attack upon the white settlements, and perpetrated the massacre at Fort Mims in Alabama, August 10, 1813. They

were defeated by the troops under General Jackson and General Coffee at Talladega and Taluschattee, their country ravaged, and their villages burned. But the spirit of the tribe was yet unbroken, and the war smouldered and spluttered along the border in the burning of cabins and raids upon the outlying settlers. It was determined to put an end to it by a decisive and exterminating campaign, and the volunteer troops were again called out under Jackson and Coffee. Houston's regiment joined this army, and marched to the scene of hostilities. The fighting remnant of the tribe had rallied for a last stand at To-ho-pe-ka, or the Horseshoe, a bend on the Tallapoosa River in Alabama, which they had fortified by breastworks across the neck of the peninsula. Here were gathered some seven hundred warriors, the flower of the fighting men of the nation, and three hundred women and children. At this place Jackson's army, numbering about two thousand men, arrived on the 27th of August, 1814.

The battle of To-ho-pe-ka was one of the most hotly contested and desperate which has ever been fought by the Indian race against civilized arms and discipline. The Indians had been wrought up to a high pitch of enthusiasm and desperation by the fervent appeals and predictions of their prophets and chiefs, and the natural strength of their position gave them additional confidence. The inclosure, about a hundred acres in extent, was trenched with ravines, and thickly wooded with trees and bush. Across the opening, which was about three hundred and fifty

yards in width, was built a breastwork of three rows of heavy pine logs, set upright in the ground, and arranged with some military skill in zigzags for a raking as well as a front fire. The rest of the peninsula was protected by the steep banks of the unfordable river.

Jackson drew up his main body in a line fronting the breastworks, and the battle was begun at half past ten o'clock in the forenoon by the fire of his small cannon, a four and a six pounder, which had been planted on an eminence about eighty yards from the breastworks. These balls had no effect on the solid pine logs, and were saluted with whoops of derision by the Indians, as they replied through the port-holes to the rifle fire of the besiegers. In the mean time General Coffee with the mounted troops and the bands of Cherokees who had joined the whites against their neighbors, the Creeks, had invested the peninsula on the opposite side of the river. Some of the Cherokees swam across the stream, and brought away the canoes, which the Creeks had hidden under the bushes of the bank. By these canoes General Coffee's troops were taken across, and the crack of their rifles and the smoke from the burning cabins at the head of the peninsula announced to Jackson's army that the Creeks had been taken in the rear. It was then half past twelve. The long roll was beaten and the order given to charge the breastworks. The onset was made with all the vigor and fury of the fiery frontiersmen.

Houston at the extreme right of his regiment dashed forward in front of the line as it charged upon the breastworks, which were spitting fire at every crevice. With a spring and a scramble he gained the top of the palisade from which Major Montgomery of his regiment had just fallen dead with a rifle ball in his head. As he did so a barbed arrow struck deep in his thigh. He sprang down, and at the head of the rush of men who had followed drove the Indians back from the palisade to take refuge among the trees and brush. As the space was cleared and the battle paused for a moment Houston called upon the lieutenant of the company to pull out the arrow. Twice he made the attempt and failed, it was so deeply embedded in the flesh. Drawing back his sword over his head Houston roared to him to try again, and that he would cut him down if he failed. This time, exerting all his strength, the lieutenant pulled out the arrow, leaving a gaping and jagged wound from which the blood gushed in a stream. Houston recrossed the breastworks to have it stanchd. While under the surgeon's hands he was seen by Jackson, who was watching the fight on horseback. Jackson ordered him to the rear. Houston made light of his wound, and begged to be allowed to rejoin the fight, but was peremptorily refused. He disobeyed after Jackson had moved off, recrossed the breastworks, and again engaged in the conflict. It was fought with all the fury of savage desperation. The Indians, driven from the palisade, took refuge in the ravines and behind

the trees and bushes. From these they fired, and were shot by the quick rifles of the frontiersmen, or killed in hand-to-hand conflicts in which clubbed rifle crashed against clubbed rifle, and hunting-knife struck against tomahawk. Not a warrior asked for or received quarter. The fight raged over the hundred-acre space all the afternoon, until the larger number of the Indians had been killed in their tracks, or shot while endeavoring to swim the turbid waters of the river.

A small band of the warriors had, meanwhile, taken refuge in a deep ravine close to the river on one side of the breastworks. It was roofed with heavy pine logs, and almost as impregnable to assault as a cave. The only way in which it could be taken was by a direct charge upon the narrow entrance. An interpreter was sent forward to summon them to surrender, but they replied with a shot, which wounded him, and with yells of rage and defiance. Jackson called for volunteers to storm the ravine, but the task was so evidently desperate that no body of men gathered to respond to the call. Houston dashed forward, calling upon his men to follow him, but without looking back to see if they did so. When within a few yards of the entrance he received two bullets in his shoulder, and his upper right arm was shattered. His musket fell from his hand, and he was helpless. No one had supported his charge, and he drew back out of the range of the fire. It was not until the logs covering the ravine had been set on fire by blazing arrows, and

the desperate warriors had been shot as they burst out of the smoke and flame, that the last refuge crumbled in ashes and blood. It was sunset when the battle was over, and the last hope of the Creek nation was crushed. In his report of the battle to his superior officer, General Pinckney, Jackson does not mention the exploit of Houston's, although it took place under his eye, but his name is contained in the list of the wounded of his regiment afterward forwarded to Governor Blount of Tennessee. It, however, gained for Houston Jackson's friendship and confidence, which he retained throughout his life.

Houston was borne from the field and put in charge of the surgeons. They considered his wounds necessarily fatal, although it does not appear why they should, unless they believed his lungs to be touched. They extracted one bullet, but made no attempt to probe for the other in an unnecessary torture. He lay all night on the damp ground, receiving none of the attention which was given to those whose wounds were not considered mortal. In the morning he was found to be alive, placed on a rude litter, and conveyed to Fort Williams, some sixty or seventy miles distant. Here he received only some rude surgery, the regular hospital for the wounded officers being at a place called the Hickory Ground. He was kindly cared for, however, a part of the time by Colonel Johnson and a part of the time by Colonel Cheatham, two volunteer officers from his State. At length he was removed to the Ten Islands, where there was a

military post and hospital. General Dougherty, who commanded the East Tennessee brigade, had him conveyed by horse litter several hundred miles through the Cherokee country to his mother's cabin. The journey was intensely painful from the rough method of conveyance, and he could only be supplied with the coarsest food. It was nearly two months after the battle of To-ho-pe-ka when he reached his mother's house. He was emaciated to a skeleton by his wounds and privations, and so changed that his mother said that she would not have recognized him, except for his eyes.

He did not recover at home under his mother's care, nor at Marysville, where he was taken for medical treatment. Finally he was removed to Knoxville, which he reached in so low a condition of vitality that the doctor said that he could live but a few days, and declined to take charge of his case. Finding at the end of that time that Houston was not only not dead, but actually somewhat better, he consented to treat him. He slowly recovered strength, and after a time was able to make the journey on horseback to Washington, which he reached shortly after the burning of the Capitol in the raid of the British troops. Being still unfit for active duty, he returned to Lexington, Va., where he spent a portion of the winter with his relatives and friends. He continued to gain in strength, and returned to Knoxville, where he received the news of the battle of New Orleans, and was placed on duty at the cantonment of his regiment.

On the reduction of the army after the declaration of peace, Houston was assigned to the First Regiment of infantry in the regular army, having received his promotion to a lieutenancy for his gallantry at To-ho-pe-ka, and ordered to report for duty at New Orleans.

He made the journey down the Cumberland and the Mississippi in a skiff with only two companions, one of whom was E. D. White, afterward Governor of Louisiana. He has recorded that while voyaging down the vast and lonely stream of the Mississippi they saw, on turning a bend, a vessel pouring out a stream of smoke, which they supposed to be on fire ; but it proved to be the first steamboat which had navigated its waters. They left their skiff at Natchez and took the steamer, which conveyed them to New Orleans. In New Orleans, Houston's wounds were again operated upon, and, in his weakened condition, the operation nearly cost him his life. After shattering his right arm at nearly the junction with his shoulder, the bullet had passed around and lodged under the shoulder-blade. The wound never entirely healed, and constantly discharged until the day of his death. After a winter of weakness and suffering in New Orleans, he went to New York for medical treatment, and then reported for duty at the Adjutant-General's office in Nashville, where he was employed until November, 1817. At that time he was appointed a sub-agent of the Cherokees under General Return J. Meigs, at the request of General Jackson, and accepted the duty, although yet hardly fit for active

service. General Jackson wrote to Assistant Secretary of War Graham, "He is a young man of sound integrity, who has my entire confidence, and in every way he is capacitated to fill the appointment. Moreover he has some claims upon the government for a severe wound received in the service, which may be considered a disability." Jackson also wrote to General Meigs, "In him I have full confidence, and in him you will have a friend clear of design and deceit, on whom you can rely under all and every circumstance, as capable to aid you in every respect." In the previous year the chiefs of the Cherokees had signed a treaty by which they agreed to surrender 1,385,200 acres of their best land in East Tennessee. A portion of the tribe were naturally indignant, and refused to remove from their homes. There were apprehensions of serious trouble when Houston was appointed, and his knowledge of the Cherokee language and acquaintance and friendship in the tribe doubtless made his influence very useful in subduing the hostility and ill-feeling. He received the thanks of Governor McMunn, who had succeeded General Meigs as agent, for the efficiency of his services.

He conducted a delegation of the Cherokees to Washington to receive the funds for the sale of their lands and fix the bounds of their reservation, and while there had trouble with John C. Calhoun, then Secretary of War, which resulted in the termination of his service in the army, and doubtless intensified the antagonism to that wing of the Democratic party represented by Calhoun, which he manifested in later

life. His first offense was in appearing before the punctilious Secretary dressed in the garments of an Indian, which he habitually assumed when living with them. He received a rebuke for this which he did not relish. But a more serious charge followed. The Indian country was full of outlaws and desperate adventurers, who were engaged in all sorts of schemes of plunder and offense against the laws. One of these was the smuggling of slaves from Florida, then a province of Spain, who were taken through the Indian reservation to the border settlements. Houston interfered to break up this nefarious traffic, and naturally excited the enmity of those engaged in it. Some of them or their agents in Washington made charges against Houston affecting his official integrity and personal conduct. He appeared before President Madison and Secretary Calhoun, and successfully defended himself, and having concluded his agency business in Washington, conducted the Cherokee delegation back to the Hilli-bee towns. But his hasty temper had taken umbrage at the unwarranted attacks upon him, and the spirit in which the inquiry into his conduct had been instituted by the Secretary of War, and he resigned, May 18, 1818. He was then a first lieutenant, and had served for five years.

Houston's service in the army of the United States was useful and creditable, although he did not rise above a subordinate, or take part in any important military operation. He earned the respect and commendation of his superior officers, and was noted for his zeal and capacity as a soldier. It was Houston's

bravery under his own eyes which attracted the friendship and confidence of Jackson, which he retained through all the vicissitudes of his career. On the other hand Houston conceived a respect and admiration for Jackson, which made him a devoted follower, personally and politically, and the only person, it was said, to whose judgment he deferred, and who could influence his actions. In many respects alike in passion and temperament, and both characteristic products of the untamed and vigorous life of the frontier, they had essential elements of difference in habits and character, and the stronger, more self-contained and sterner nature of Jackson dominated the more impassioned and enthusiastic temperament of Houston.

Senator Benton in his speech in the Senate, May 16, 1836, in favor of acknowledging the independence of Texas as a consequence of the battle of San Jacinto, bore testimony, in his somewhat highflown and stilted way, to the good qualities of Houston as a young soldier. He said, "Houston was appointed an ensign in the army of the United States during the late war with Great Britain, and served in the Creek campaign under the banner of Jackson. I was the lieutenant-colonel of the regiment to which he belonged, and the first field-officer to whom he reported. I then marked in him the same soldierly and gentlemanly qualities, which have since distinguished his eventful career; frank, generous and brave, ready to do or to suffer whatever the obligations of civil or military duty imposed; and always prompt to answer the call of honor, patriotism or friendship."