

Who Rides with Santa Anna?

EDWARD D. HOCH

Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna stood pensively on a hardened hill of sand, looking north toward a little cluster of smoldering cottonwoods that had once sheltered the walls of the Alamo Mission. For nearly two weeks, his overwhelming forces had battered at the small band of Texans and Americans. For nearly two weeks every attack had been thrown back—until now the plain between the Mexican camp and the little mission was strewn with the trappings of unsettled battle.

“Once more,” Santa Anna breathed to the officer at his side. “Once more we must try it.”

“But five hundred of our men have died already, President.”

“What is five hundred when seven times that number still ride with us? Prepare for another attack.”

And he stood there, alone, searching the horizon with his glass, swinging it from time to time back toward the shell-scarred walls of the Alamo Mission, searching for any sign of movement. Presently the officer, Juan, returned to his side.

“Yes, Juan?”

“I have passed the orders, President.”

"Very good."

"But a single rider has come in from the south . . ."

"A rider?" Santa Anna wheeled around, turning his glass toward the camp. "A messenger from Mexico City, perhaps?"

"No, President," Juan shook his head. "He is an old man—though he rides well. He wishes to speak with you."

"Very well. Bring him to me. But be ready to ride."

And presently, a little old man came slowly up the path to the place where Santa Anna stood. A short man, with a face that still seemed to retain some of the shrewdness of youth, combined now with some uncertain wisdom of age.

"Good day, great Santa Anna," the old man spoke. "How does the battle progress?" His words were an odd sort of Spanish, tempered with an accent that might have been French.

"Who are you, old man?" Santa Anna asked. "And whatever brings you to this settlement of San Antonio, before the mission of the Alamo?"

"Word reached me of your difficulties, great general. I only thought to offer my assistance."

Santa Anna smiled, revealing a crooked row of yellow teeth. "Your fighting days are over, old man. The battle today is for the younger."

But the old man stretched out a hand in protest. "I am but sixty-seven years of age, and can still ride a horse with the best of your men."

"What is one more man to me?" Santa Anna asked.

"But I can win you the battle," the little man insisted.

"You are a soldier?"

"I fought in Europe in my younger days. Many great battles!"

Santa Anna nodded. "Some day the history books will remember this as a great battle, also."

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The old man took the glass from his hands and peered through it toward the cluster of cottonwoods. "That is the Alamo Mission?"

"Correct," Santa Anna replied. "My objective since February 23. Only now it is more a fort than a mission."

"How many men do they have?"

"Less than two hundred, I'm sure. And with them are men like Travis, Bowie, and Crockett. If I could wipe them off the map at a single stroke, there would be no more trouble with this idea of Texas independence."

The old man dropped the glass from his eye. "I will get it for you. Draw me a map in the sand to show me the layout of the mission. Quickly."

"Well," Santa Anna began, "here are the walls . . ." He sketched quickly with his sword, somehow catching the eagerness of the old man at his side. ". . . and here is an old convent, with a courtyard. And a small hospital, and a chapel . . ."

"I see . . . Very well. How many men do you have?"

"Thirty-five hundred. But it's those walls—those confounded walls!"

"You have tried to scale them?"

"We have tried everything. For two weeks . . ."

"But you have cannon."

"A few. More than the defenders, certainly."

"But you have been firing into the mission rather than at the walls! That was your trouble!"

"And what would you suggest?" Santa Anna queried.

The old man produced a dainty jeweled snuff box, encrusted with a glittering single letter N. "Direct all your cannons at a single point," he said. "Breach the wall and pour your overwhelming forces through the hole."

Santa Anna listened, his eyes glued to the gems as the old man's hands manipulated the snuff. "Will you ride with me?"

"But a moment ago, you thought me too old."

"Never fear. Will you ride with me?"

"How far, Santa Anna?"

"Across all of Texas."

The old man's eyes glistened. "I will ride farther. I will ride with you into Washington itself, where ten years from this date you will be emperor of all the continent."

"Then we ride! Jose," he shouted, "prepare the cannon for firing . . ."

And the air was filled with smoke and fire and screaming, roaring death, and soon the walls of the Alamo Mission trembled and shivered.

"We ride," Santa Anna shouted. "Jose, order a full attack. The horsemen and then the foot soldiers."

"This is the last attack?"

"The last attack, Jose! The wall is breached . . ."

And at his side, the old man wheeled his white horse high into the air. "Pass the word, Santa Anna. Not a defender must remain alive. We must wipe them out, to bring all of Texas to its knees . . ."

And Santa Anna passed the word . . . And then they were thundering across the plain, past the deserted dirt roads, past the crumbling cottonwoods, toward the breach in the Alamo wall . . .

"I feel victory in my bones," Santa Anna shouted to the man at his side. "This is my day."

And the old man nodded as he spurred his great horse forward. "Victory, as long as we ride together. This time, I will make no mistake. This time . . . there will be no Waterloo . . ."