

## CHAPTER XVII

### CHARACTERISTICS

HOUSTON, although with such marked and peculiar individual characteristics, was essentially the product of his time and circumstance. He grew out of that condition in which the generation of the descendants of the original settlers of the country were brought into contact with the forces of nature and the savage inhabitants in a way to influence their native character as well as their lives. They were born into the pioneer period, instead of coming to it in mature life, and they had not shared the original education and training of their ancestors. It was a state of barbarism in its outward forms, and they were more essentially a part of it than those who had preceded them. Their education was limited and meagre, and their training and governing influences were in the life of the wilderness, the primeval forest, which enveloped them with its perils and hardships, its temptings to adventure, and the labors necessary to carve out a home in it. This produced a hardy and indomitable spirit, which found its relief in the enthusiasm of perilous adventure and in the pursuit of game, and a vigor and energy of the bodily powers which found their keenest zest in dangerous sports and exhausting

trials of strength. It was a race of vikings, drawn by passion and exuberant energy to the life of the forest and the adventures of the wilderness, as their prototypes had been to those of the sea. They retained the restraints of their English descent, and their instinct was to found a settled community with all the germs of civilization, but in their characteristic types they were possessed by an overmastering impulse for adventure, and the hand-to-hand struggle with unsubdued nature. They assimilated to a certain degree the ways and customs of the aboriginal inhabitants with whom they came in contact, with whom they fought, and in the midst of whom they lived. They had the migratory instinct and the fondness for wild life of the Indians, and, if they were governed by the higher traditions and motives of civilization, their lives and natures were also tintured with savage passions and impulses. Sometimes the resemblance and influence were developed in a remarkable degree.

The kinship of Houston with the Indian character has already been noticed. It led him, when a youth, to desert the restraints of even a frontier civilization, and take up his home among them, and he manifested the characteristic qualities and something of the manners of an Indian chief throughout his whole life. His powers of popular oratory, his perception of character and his influence over men, his courage and bold conceptions of policy, his generosity and indifference to wealth, were the characteristics of a barba-

rian leader. Then his undisguised personal vanity, his tricky cunning, and his passionate and reckless temperament were alike the attributes of the Indian. He might have figured as one of the leaders of the Greeks at the siege of Troy, with their practical wisdom and their childish simplicity. It has been said that if he had been bound naked upon the back of a wild horse like Mazeppa the first tribe he came to would have elected him a prince; but it would have been a wandering tribe, and not a civilized and settled people. He owed his leadership in Texas to the conditions of tumult and adventure into which the people were thrown, since their lives represented in many ways the features of primitive barbarism. This is not to say that they were barbarians by nature, but in their strife with the wilderness and their hostile contact with the Indians and the Mexicans they were subject to all the conditions of primitive and incessant warfare which colored their lives and governed their actions. Houston's later life manifested distinct traces of his primitive habits and training, and revealed his limitations, in spite of the practical sagacity and broad wisdom which frequently characterized his statesmanship. He was out of place in the Senate, in contact with minds trained to think within the lines of civilized education, and to argue logically upon legal premises. He never adapted himself to its atmosphere or acquired its forms of oratory. He was like an Indian chief in a modern legislature. His strength was when he

could appeal to the thoughts and feelings of the common people, sway them by his vigorous and somewhat histrionic eloquence, tickle them by his familiar humor, and influence them by his shrewd common sense. It is doubtful if there has been in modern times any such orator for a crowd, except, perhaps, Daniel O'Connell. Certainly there has been none in American history who could so sway a frontier audience. It used to be said that there were but two things that could draw out the people of Texas, — a circus and Sam Houston. Time and again he awed their turbulent spirits when they were in a state of the highest excitement and passion, and when any other man would have been howled down or subjected to bodily violence. Time and again he converted popular assemblages to his own way of thinking, in spite of the most violent prejudice, and his political power was based on his popular eloquence. Yet he was far from being a demagogue. He did not flatter the passions and prejudices of the multitude, or govern his opinions by theirs. He withstood them with manly courage when there was occasion, and, if he could not convert them, vindicated himself. His power over the people was due to his genuine sympathy with them, as well as to his personal and popular gifts. He felt as they did, and his desires and ambitions were for the welfare and prosperity of those who tilled the soil, and built homes in the wilderness with their own hands. He had no liking for, or affiliation with, that class who were endeavoring to

build up a slave oligarchy at the South, and regarded them as the enemies of the section as well as of the nation. The most of his political quarrels were from the rivalries of ambitious schemers, eager for conquest or personal power at the expense of the people. His own personal ambition was predominant, but it was based upon the welfare of the people, and he sacrificed it rather than submit to their erroneous judgment, and lead them in the way to ruin. In the affection and confidence of the people he had no competitor, and when they were swept away from him by the passion and excitement of the outbreak of the civil war, there was no one who could take his place as a popular leader.

As a soldier Houston's career was too brief and limited to entitle him to rank among distinguished military leaders. In his first campaign he was merely the youthful subordinate who had only the opportunity to display his courage and dash, and acquire a reputation for bravery. In the second there were no conditions which involved accomplished military strategy, or tactical skill in battle. The only choice was either to meet the enemy in a mass at the threshold of the country, or allow him to penetrate within it, at the cost of the destruction of the settlements along the line of march, in the expectation that he would either divide his forces, or that they would become weakened by being drawn away from their base, so that they could be attacked with an assurance of victory. The decision simply required

the exercise of practical judgment and common sense. There may be doubt whether the fighting quality of the Texans would not have enabled them to defeat Santa Anna's army with even such odds as there were at the beginning, but the chances were uncertain, and a defeat would have meant the destruction of the army and the subjugation of the country. It was a risk which the circumstances would not justify, and Houston was governed by wisdom as well as prudence in the course which he took. The battle of San Jacinto required no tactical manœuvring. The only thing to be done was to fall on the enemy with all the force of a sudden and crushing attack, and to trust to the *élan* and vigor of the Texan soldiers to overwhelm the feebler physique and fainter spirit of the Mexican. It simply required a leader to head the assault, keep his men in line, and restrain their fire until the deadly moment. This Houston did, and it may be said that the most accomplished soldier could have done no more. What Houston might have done with a larger army and a more extensive field of operations can only be a matter of conjecture. He simply accomplished what the circumstances permitted, and displayed his natural capacity and common sense, but it was not enough to entitle him to a place in the ranks of trained and skillful military leaders. His enemies affected to doubt his physical courage, and ascribed his retreat to personal timidity. But he was wounded in leading assaults in both the battles in which he was engaged, and that may be taken to set-

tle the question of his courage. It was still farther demonstrated throughout his life by his firmness in facing turbulent mobs, and in withstanding the threats of open and secret violence which so often accompanied his political action. It is true that he did not have that fighting disposition and that fondness for personal combat which characterized the fiery spirits of some of his associates and rivals. He was not a fire-eater or a desperado. He had too much common sense to put his life at the call of any individual who desired to provoke him to a duel, and would not give his enemies the chance of overthrowing his policy by killing him. No one but his antagonists blamed him for this wise course, even if there had been no moral principle involved, and it is enough to say that he could not have held his place in such a state of society as that in which he lived from his youth up without having given abundant proof of his physical courage.

As a statesman he showed broad wisdom and practical sagacity. His action in the creation of a working government for the Republic of Texas, without means, and in a turbulent and scattered society, amid the opposition and intrigue of ambitious rivals, however much he may have been aided by some of his associates and by the support of the more intelligent element among the people, was a proof of his great administrative capacity, and the chief credit is due to his wisdom and influence. His course in restraining the eager adventurers who came to the country for

glory and conquest, and the restless spirits among the settlers from undertaking foolish and reckless attempts at the invasion of Mexico, showed his sound and practical judgment, and saved the country from great calamities, if not from destruction. His treatment of Santa Anna manifested his wisdom, as well as his magnanimity, and his dealings with the Indians were those of enlightened statesmanship as well as philanthropy. His prudent and practical economy rescued the Republic from financial collapse, and his negotiations with foreign nations were shrewd and skillful in effect, while dignified in manner and elevated in purpose. They did much to preserve Texas from being attacked by Mexico, and undoubtedly contributed greatly to the annexation of Texas to the United States at the time it was accomplished. Considering the enormous difficulties of creating a government out of such materials, the troubles resulting from the turbulence and lawlessness of the adventurers and the restless and desperate opposition of rivals, the dangers of invasion from Mexico, the constant menace and trouble from the Indians, and the lack of means and credit, it must be admitted that Houston accomplished a task in the highest degree creditable to his wisdom and sagacity, and which it is, perhaps, not too much to say that no other could have done so well.

In the field of national statesmanship Houston exhibited equal qualities of broad wisdom, firmness, and courage. He perceived the dangers which threat-

ened his section from the aggressive designs of the leading slave-holders, and had the courage to oppose them at the cost of his political fortunes. To him and to Benton is due the credit of understanding and advocating the true interests of the South, as well as of the nation, and their position was such that it vindicated their courage as well as their statesmanship. It was easy for Northern statesmen, representing the predominant sentiment of their constituents, to oppose schemes for the territorial extension of slavery, but it was quite another matter for representatives of the South to oppose the apparent interests of their section, and all the force of active political intrigue working upon popular feeling. Houston's speeches on the Kansas-Nebraska bill show a prophetic prescience, as well as a commanding eloquence, and vindicate his right to a high rank among American statesmen. Almost alone he advocated wisdom and justice in the treatment of the Indians, and the plans which he urged for the improvement of their condition would have saved the nation from the just reproach of injustice and neglect towards a feeble and helpless race. Some of his schemes were less wise, such as the attempt to induce the United States to assume a protectorate over Mexico, and the delusive vision of the presidency led him for a time into affiliation with Know-Nothingism; but as a whole his action in the legislative councils of the nation was creditable to his wisdom and sagacity. At the outbreak of the civil war Houston manifested his enlight-

ened devotion to the Union, and his appreciation of the perils and calamities in which secession would involve the South. He resisted the folly and madness so long as it could be done by peaceful means, but events were too strong for him. The condition and position of Texas were such that he could not have taken the action that was followed by some of the Union leaders in the Border States, even if he wished to do so; and when the rest of the South seceded, Texas was inevitably taken with it. Houston's sympathies were with his people and with the South as a section, and when the war began he was for resistance. His action was by no means governed by timidity or demagoguery. He showed his personal courage by opposing the tide of violent popular feeling at imminent risk, and he surrendered his office in order to vindicate his judgment. His course was entirely patriotic and consistent, considering his feelings and circumstances; and the blame which has been thrown upon him by Northern advocates of the Union for not plunging Texas into a civil war within the limits of the State is wholly undeserved. He believed in and supported the Union so long as it was possible without bloodshed; but he gave up the struggle when it involved a civil war among his own people.

As a politician in the ordinary sense of the word Houston was extremely skillful. He was a keen and accurate judge of personal character, and knew at once those who would become rivals, and those whom

he could attach to himself as supporters. The first he attacked without stint, and overwhelmed with opprobrium and abuse, which aroused their fiercest indignation. The second he flattered, and attached to his fortunes by kindly familiarity and practical service. He was always interested in the welfare of young men, and ready to give them an opportunity to display their talents, if he did not believe them dangerous to the public welfare, or in the way of his personal supremacy. It is not true, however, that he was intolerant to opinion when it was not manifested in personal opposition, and his friendship for his colleague, Senator Bisk, was by no means the result of political subservience or lack of independence on the part of the latter. Many of his friends differed from him without exciting his animosity, and, if determined and masterful, he was not tyrannical. To personal enemies he was, however, vindictive, and never spared them any blow which could contribute to their discomfiture. His enemies complained of his "Indian cunning," and he was not always straightforward in his political action. He was fond of tricks and surprises, which he apparently practiced for the love of them, or to excite the admiration of the people for his shrewdness, and affected an air of mystery which sometimes angered his friends as well as his enemies. A specimen of what he termed a "ruse," in dealing with a troublesome individual, is given by Mr. Ashbell Smith in his "Reminiscences of the Texas Republic:" —

“San Antonio was much the largest, richest, most influential city of Texas of that period. It was remote from the scene of the Texan government. There was no intervening population between it and the Mexican frontier. For its protection and that of the country a considerable squadron of cavalry was stationed in the city. This squadron was indeed the only military force of Texas kept mobilized, that was ready to take the field. Major Western, who commanded this body of cavalry, had by some acts and significant innuendoes intimated that he cared very little for the one-horse government in the city of Houston. President Houston was apprehensive that an order to recall the major or to relieve him might be disobeyed. It was announced publicly that a minister would be appointed to represent Texas at the court of St. James. Colonel William H. Patton was going to San Antonio on his own private business. President Houston, in a long and friendly conversation with Colonel Patton, at length adverted as by accident to the proposed mission to England. He spoke of Major Western, lauded his courtly manners, his polished address, his diplomatic ability; said the major reminded him strongly of Mr. Van Buren; asked Colonel Patton what he thought of the appointment of Major Western to this mission. All this he begged Colonel Patton to hold in strict confidence, — ‘nothing was absolutely determined upon,’ — ‘Colonel Patton need not be surprised at anything.’ The President, waiting until he heard of Colonel Patton’s

arrival at San Antonio, sent through the war department orders to Major Western to report in person at the seat of government. The major presented himself in Houston, radiant and decorous as Titus at the head of the Roman legions organized for the conquest of Jerusalem. Time rolled on. The major became visibly impatient despite the gracious accord with which President Houston greeted him. At length he began to inquire very quietly who was to be appointed to England, — he inquired of your speaker, who was a member of Houston's staff, — but Ashbell Smith 'knew nothing of cabinet matters, he was not a member of the Cabinet.' Finally instructions were being made out in the state department and General Pinkney Henderson was making preparations to leave for London. The rumor leaked out, — the major 'would not believe it.' 'President Houston had better judgment of men.' 'What did Henderson know of diplomacy?' The appointment of General Henderson became an established fact. The major 'was disgusted;' he 'would go back to San Antonio;' and he did, but he found his successor there, well established in the command of the cavalry. Referring to this matter at the time, General Houston said to your speaker that he would have no pronunciamentos of the Mexican fashion in Texas during his presidency. During his second presidency he had to confront and ward off the far more perilous danger of the pronunciamentos which were threatened, and which might have proved disastrous, but for his consummate tact

in charming them down. Recurring to the incident just related, General Houston at a subsequent time provided comfortably for his disappointed old friend, the major, by placing him at the head of the Indian bureau."

There are many other anecdotes, perhaps less authentic, of the manner in which Houston tripped up his political adversaries, or led them into skillfully laid traps, and the stories of his cunning added to his stock of admiration among the people.

Specimens of Houston's public speeches have been given. They show in some degree the defects of his education. There is not always a skillful or even a familiar choice of words, and the style is that of the heavy and somewhat stilted oratory of the time, without the massive polish which sometimes distinguished it, as in the case of Webster and Calhoun. But at times it was vivified by the strength of the thought and feeling behind it, and rose to the height of a dignified and forcible eloquence. His style of popular oratory has already been sufficiently characterized. His private speech was vigorous and incisive, and he often characterized his enemies with powerful force and humor. His description of Jefferson Davis was one of those epigrams which may be accepted as the truth of history, "Ambitious as Lucifer, and cold as a lizard." Houston had a personal follower by the name of S——, whom he had obliged with small federal and state offices, and who professed great devotion to him. During the secession difficulties,

however, he turned against Houston, and violently attacked and abused him. This was mentioned to Houston with a condemnation of S——'s ingratitude. "You must n't be hard on S——," said Houston. "I was always fond of dogs, and S—— has all the virtues of a dog, except his fidelity."

Houston's most conspicuous weaknesses of temperament were his personal vanity and his tendency to histrionism. The eccentricity and theatrical display which characterized his dress have been noticed. It was almost childish in its manifest purpose to attract attention, and only his magnificent physique could have carried off his draping himself in an Indian blanket or a Mexican poncho, and the other bizarre eccentricities of his attire, without ridicule, and they were another evidence of the tendencies of a barbarian chieftain. They passed in the rude and unconventional society of the frontier which shared in the same tendencies and irregularities, but they detracted from the dignity and sobriety which are the customs of civilization, and gave an air of melodramatic eccentricity to Houston which was an injury to his weight and influence. Perhaps no other strong and practical-minded man has had this weakness in so marked a degree as Houston, in spite of the record of the early velvets and laces of Disraeli. His histrionism was no less marked. An old associate and friendly observer has remarked that Houston was always acting, that is, always trying to impress the persons he was with, whether it was in a room or at a public meet-

ing. Another has said that his air of dignity never left him, even when drunk, and that he preserved his native superiority even in the rudest familiarity of the camp fire or the frontier frolic. This again is characteristic of the Indian chief. He appreciated the value of a "scene," like Napoleon, and his outbursts of apparently uncontrollable anger were as artificial as those of his friend and model, Andrew Jackson. He had the grand air which carried off the artificiality, as in the case of the elder Pitt, but there was a sense of the parade in his manner which alienated practical-minded men, and which only his real capacity and masterfulness excused. It imposed upon the people, however, and was one of the sources of his strength with them. He had a profound sense of his dignity and importance, and sometimes manifested it in incongruous ways. It was said in jest that his signature was written so as to read "I am Houston," instead of "Sam Houston," and, as has been recorded, he had a habit, when he wished to be particularly impressive, of speaking of himself in the third person. He had a good many difficulties about trifles, and at one time he was sued in the justice court of Houston by an Irishman who had dug a well for him. Houston asserted that the man had left his tools in the well, and that this was an offset to his claim. Judgment was given against Houston by default, and he appealed. On the trial of the appeal he claimed that as a Senator of the United States he had been called upon by his constituents to

make a speech, and that this was a valid reason for his absence, so that the case should not have been defaulted. He could not understand why his appeal was rejected on this excuse, and the dignity of his office as a Senator disregarded. But his sense of personal dignity had its force under adverse circumstances. He never showed any sign of defeat, and after his deposition as governor he walked the streets of Austin as if he had been the victor in the contest.

Houston was a man of warm affections and kindly nature. His manners to women were remarkably courteous and deferential. His word of address was not "Madam," but "Lady," and no matter what their rank or station his impressive politeness and consideration were always the same. It was not an affectation, but sprang from a genuine impulse of respect and chivalric feeling. His family affection was deep and strong. His second wife, to whom he owed so much for her influence upon his personal conduct, was enshrined in his deepest feelings of love and respect. To borrow Hawthorne's phrase, he had a smile which children loved, and gained their confidence and affection at once. He was fond of playing with children and telling them stories, and was constantly engaged in whittling out toys for them from his supplies of pine sticks. His own children were brought up in kindly freedom and confidence, although with a wise and judicious education and training. His slaves were kindly treated, and were in a measure members of the family. He was gener-

ous and helpful to all persons in distress, and his money and property were at the call of all who needed assistance. It is recorded that he once pulled off his coat and gave it to a ragged soldier who had served at San Jacinto, and his acts of charity were numerous and spontaneous.

His excesses in liquor were those of his time and temperament. The mighty men of his era indulged in tremendous exaltations of intoxication, as they did in the excitement of combats, from the craving of their overflowing animal spirits, and fought and drank with equal appetite. Houston in the worst period of his indulgence was not an habitual sot, who drank from a degraded physical appetite, but from the stimulus of his temperament to excitement, and to drown grief and disappointment. There was something Homeric in his debauches, and his freaks of conduct when under their influence were often of wild extravagance. His great physical strength displayed itself in the smashing of furniture, and his wild whoops woke the sleepers with apprehensions of an Indian invasion. But somehow, as has been said, he kept the respect of the people, and no sense of degradation attached itself to his excesses. Drunk or sober Sam Houston was always "Sam Houston."

The limitations of Houston's character will forbid his being reckoned among the world's great men. But no one will deny that he was a strong man, capable of great achievement, practical-minded in spite of his eccentricities and weaknesses, with wise concep-

tions of statesmanship and policy, determined and courageous, sincerely patriotic, and devoted to the welfare of his people. A type of his time and circumstances, he rose above them by his capacity and energy, and signalized his own individuality, as well as illustrated the tendencies and opportunities which created him. There were others like him, but he surpassed them all except his prototype, Andrew Jackson. There will never be another Sam Houston in American history, for the state of society which produced him has passed away, and there are no longer such opportunities for pioneer adventure, and the creation of a State in the wilderness by aggressive settlements and the expulsion of a weaker race of colonists. He has a marked place in the history of the nation, for what he represented as well as for what he did, and his figure will grow in interest as a type of a peculiar and, with all its faults, a heroic period.