**Bexar Scrip No. 2692**

O. Henry

Whenever you visit Austin you should by all means go to see the General Land Office.

As you pass up the avenue you turn sharp round the corner of the court house, and on a steep hill before you you see a medieval castle.

You think of the Rhine; the “castled crag of Drachenfels”; the Lorelei; and the vine-clad slopes of Germany. And German it is in every line of its architecture and design.

The plan was drawn by an old draftsman from the “Vaterland,” whose heart still loved the scenes of his native land, and it is said he reproduced the design of a certain castle near his birthplace, with remarkable fidelity.

Under the present administration a new coat of paint has vulgarized its ancient and venerable walls. Modern tiles have replaced the limestone slabs of its floors, worn in hollows by the tread of thousands of feet, and smart and gaudy fixtures have usurped the place of the time-worn furniture that has been consecrated by the touch of hands that Texas will never cease to honor.

But even now, when you enter the building, you lower your voice, and time turns backward for you, for the atmosphere which you breathe is cold with the exudation of buried generations.

The building is stone with a coating of concrete; the walls are immensely thick; it is cool in the summer and warm in the winter; it is isolated and sombre; standing apart from the other state buildings, sullen and decaying, brooding on the past.

Twenty years ago it was much the same as now; twenty years from now the garish newness will be worn off and it will return to its appearance of gloomy decadence.

People living in other states can form no conception of the vastness and importance of the work performed and the significance of the millions of records and papers composing the archives of this office.

The title deeds, patents, transfers and legal documents connected with every foot of land owned in the state of Texas are filed here.

Volumes could be filled with accounts of the knavery, the double-dealing, the cross purposes, the perjury, the lies, the bribery, the alteration and erasing, the suppressing and destroying of papers, the various schemes and plots that for the sake of the almighty dollar have left their stains upon the records of the General Land Office.

No reference is made to the employees. No more faithful, competent and efficient force of men exists in the clerical portions of any government, but there is—or was, for their day is now over—a class of land speculators commonly called land sharks, unscrupulous and greedy, who have left their trail in every department of this office, in the shape of titles destroyed, patents cancelled, homes demolished and torn away, forged transfers and lying affidavits.

Before the modern tiles were laid upon the floors, there were deep hollows in the limestone slabs, worn by the countless feet that daily trod uneasily through its echoing corridors, pressing from file room to business room, from commissioner’s sanctum to record books and back again.

The honest but ignorant settler, bent on saving the little plot of land he called home, elbowed the wary land shark who was searching the records for evidence to oust him; the lordly cattle baron, relying on his influence and money, stood at the Commissioner’s desk side by side with the preemptor, whose little potato patch lay like a minute speck of island in the vast, billowy sea, of his princely pastures, and played the old game of “freeze-out,” which is as old as Cain and Abel.

The trail of the serpent is through it all.

Honest, earnest men have wrought for generations striving to disentangle the shameful coil that certain years of fraud and infamy have wound. Look at the files and see the countless endorsements of those in authority

“Transfer doubtful—locked up.”

“Certificate a forgery—locked up.”

“Signature a forgery.”

“Patent refused—duplicate patented elsewhere.”

“Field notes forged.”

“Certificates stolen from office”—and soon ad infinitum.

The record books, spread upon long tables, in the big room upstairs, are open to the examination of all. Open them, and you will find the dark and greasy finger prints of half a century’s handling. The quick hand of the land grabber has fluttered the leaves a million times; the damp clutch of the perturbed tiller of the soil has left traces of his calling on the ragged leaves.

Interest centres in the file room.

This is a large room, built as a vault, fireproof, and entered by but a single door.

There is “No Admission” on the portal; and the precious files are handed out by a clerk in charge only on presentation of an order signed by the Commissioner or chief clerk.

In years past too much laxity prevailed in its management, and the files were handled by all corners, simply on their request, and returned at their will, or not at all.

In these days most of the mischief was done. In the file room, there are about –- files, each in a paper wrapper, and comprising the title papers of a particular tract of land.

You ask the clerk in charge for the papers relating to any survey in Texas. They are arranged simply in districts and numbers.

He disappears from the door, you hear the sliding of a tin box, the lid snaps, and the file is in your hand.

Go up there some day and call for Bexar Scrip No. 2692.

The file clerk stares at you for a second, says shortly:

“Out of file.”

It has been missing twenty years.

The history of that file has never been written before.

Twenty years ago there was a shrewd land agent living in Austin who devoted his undoubted talents and vast knowledge of land titles, and the laws governing them, to the locating of surveys made by illegal certificates, or improperly made, and otherwise of no value through non-compliance with the statutes, or whatever flaws his ingenious and unscrupulous mind could unearth.

He found a fatal defect in the title of the land as on file in Bexar Scrip No. 2692 and placed a new certificate upon the survey in his own name.

The law was on his side.

Every sentiment of justice, of right, and humanity was against him.

The certificate by virtue of which the original survey had been made was missing.

It was not be found in the file, and no memorandum or date on the wrapper to show that it had ever been filed.

Under the law the land was vacant, unappropriated public domain, and open to location.

The land was occupied by a widow and her only son, and she supposed her title good.

The railroad had surveyed a new line through the property, and it had doubled in value.

Sharp, the land agent, did not communicate with her in any way until he had filed his papers, rushed his claim through the departments and into the patent room for patenting.

Then he wrote her a letter, offering her the choice of buying from him or vacating at once.

He received no reply.

One day he was looking through some files and came across the missing certificate. Some one, probably an employee of the office, had by mistake, after making some examination, placed it in the wrong file, and curiously enough another inadvertence, in there being no record of its filing on the wrapper, had completed the appearance of its having never been filed.

Sharp called for the file in which it belonged and scrutinized it carefully, fearing he might have overlooked some endorsement regarding its return to the office.

On the back of the certificate was plainly endorsed the date of filing, according to law, and signed by the chief clerk.

If this certificate should be seen by the examining clerk, his own claim, when it came up for patenting, would not be worth the paper on which it was written.

Sharp glanced furtively around. A young man, or rather a boy about eighteen years of age, stood a few feet away regarding him closely with keen black eyes. Sharp, a little confused, thrust the certificate into the file where it properly belonged and began gathering up the other papers.

The boy came up and leaned on the desk beside him.

“A right interesting office, sir!” he said. “I have never been in here before. All those papers, now, they are about lands, are they not? The titles and deeds, and such things?”

“Yes,” said Sharp. “They are supposed to contain all the title papers.”

“This one, now,” said the boy, taking up Bexar Scrip No. 2692, “what land does this represent the title of? Ah, I see ‘Six hundred and forty acres in B–- country? Absalom Harris, original grantee.’ Please tell me, I am so ignorant of these things, how can you tell a good survey from a bad one. I am told that there are a great many illegal and fraudulent surveys in this office. I suppose this one is all right?”

“No,” said Sharp. “The certificate is missing. It is invalid.”

“That paper I just saw you place in that file, I suppose is something else—field notes, or a transfer probably?”

“Yes,” said Sharp, hurriedly, “corrected field notes. Excuse me, I am a little pressed for time.”

The boy was watching him with bright, alert eyes.

It would never do to leave the certificate in the file; but he could not take it out with that inquisitive boy watching him.

He turned to the file room, with a dozen or more files in his hands, and accidentally dropped part of them on the floor. As he stooped to pick them up he swiftly thrust Bexar Scrip No. 2692 in the inside breast pocket of his coat.

This happened at just half-past four o’clock, and when the file clerk took the files he threw them in a pile in his room, came out and locked the door.

The clerks were moving out of the doors in long, straggling lines.

It was closing time.

Sharp did not desire to take the file from the Land Office.

The boy might have seen him place the file in his pocket, and the penalty of the law for such an act was very severe.

Some distance back from the file room was the draftsman’s room now entirely vacated by its occupants.

Sharp dropped behind the outgoing stream of men, and slipped slyly into this room.

The clerks trooped noisily down the iron stairway, singing, whistling, and talking.

Below, the night watchman awaited their exit, ready to close and bar the two great doors to the south and cast.

It is his duty to take careful note each day that no one remains in the building after the hour of closing.

Sharp waited until all sounds had ceased.

It was his intention to linger until everything was quiet, and then to remove the certificate from the file, and throw the latter carelessly on some draftsman’s desk as if it had been left there during the business of the day.

He knew also that he must remove the certificate from the office or destroy it, as the chance finding of it by a clerk would lead to its immediately being restored to its proper place, and the consequent discovery that his location over the old survey was absolutely worthless.

As he moved cautiously along the stone floor the loud barking of the little black dog, kept by the watchman, told that his sharp ears had heard the sounds of his steps. The great, hollow rooms echoed loudly, move as lightly as he could.

Sharp sat down at a desk and laid the file before him. In all his queer practices and cunning tricks he had not yet included any act that was downright criminal. He had always kept on the safe side of the law, but in the deed he was about to commit there was no compromise to be made with what little conscience he had left.

There is no well-defined boundary line between honesty and dishonesty.

The frontiers of one blend with the outside limits of the other, and he who attempts to tread this dangerous ground may be sometimes in one domain and sometimes in the other; so the only safe road is the broad highway that leads straight through and has been well defined by line and compass.

Sharp was a man of what is called high standing in the community. That is, his word in a trade was as good as any man’s; his check was as good as so much cash, and so regarded; he went to church regularly; went in good society and owed no man anything.

He was regarded as a sure winner in any land trade he chose to make, but that was his occupation.

The act he was about to commit now would place him forever in the ranks of those who chose evil for their portion—if it was found out.

More than that, it would rob a widow and her son of property soon to be of great value, which, if not legally theirs, was theirs certainly by every claim of justice.

But he had gone too far to hesitate.

His own survey was in the patent room for patenting. His own title was about to be perfected by the State’s own hand.

The certificate must be destroyed.

He leaned his head on his hands for a moment, and as he did so a sound behind him caused his heart to leap with guilty fear, but before he could rise, a hand came over his shoulder and grasped the file.

He rose quickly, as white as paper, rattling his chair loudly on the stone floor.

The boy who land spoken to him earlier stood contemplating him with contemptuous and flashing eyes, and quietly placed the file in the left breast pocket of his coat.

“So, Mr. Sharp, by nature as well as by name,” he said, “it seems that I was right in waiting behind the door in order to see you safely out. You will appreciate the pleasure I feel in having done so when I tell you my name is Harris. My mother owns the land on which you have filed, and if there is any justice in Texas she shall hold it. I am not certain, but I think I saw you place a paper in this file this afternoon, and it is barely possible that it may be of value to me. I was also impressed with the idea that you desired to remove it again, but had not the opportunity. Anyway, I shall keep it until to-morrow and let the Commissioner decide.”

Far back among Mr. Sharp’s ancestors there must have been some of the old berserker blood, for his caution, his presence of mind left him, and left him possessed of a blind, devilish, unreasoning rage that showed itself in a moment in the white glitter of his eye.

“Give me that file, boy,” he said, thickly, holding out his hand.

“I am no such fool, Mr. Sharp,” said the youth. “This file shall be laid before the Commissioner to-morrow for examination. If he finds—Help! Help!”

Sharp was upon him like a tiger and bore him to the floor. The boy was strong and vigorous, but the suddenness of the attack gave him no chance to resist. He struggled up again to his feet, but it was an animal, with blazing eyes and cruel-looking teeth that fought him, instead of a man.

Mr. Sharp, a man of high standing and good report, was battling for his reputation.

Presently there was a dull sound, and another, and still one more, and a blade flashing white and then red, and Edward Harris dropped down like some stuffed effigy of a man, that boys make for sport, with his limbs all crumpled and lax, on the stone floor of the Land Office.

The old watchman was deaf, and heard nothing.

The little dog barked at the foot of the stairs until his master made him come into his room.

Sharp stood there for several minutes holding in his hand his bloody clasp knife, listening to the cooing of the pigeons on the roof, and the loud ticking of the clock above the receiver’s desk.

A map rustled on the wall and his blood turned to ice; a rat ran across some strewn papers, and his scalp prickled, and he could scarcely moisten his dry lips with his tongue.

Between the file room and the draftsman’s room there is a door that opens on a small dark spiral stairway that winds from the lower floor to the ceiling at the top of the house.

This stairway was not used then, nor is it now.

It is unnecessary, inconvenient, dusty, and dark as night, and was a blunder of the architect who designed the building.

This stairway ends above at the tent-shaped space between the roof and the joists.

That space is dark and forbidding, and being useless is rarely visited.

Sharp opened this door and gazed for a moment up this narrow cobwebbed stairway.

After dark that night a man opened cautiously one of the lower windows of the Land Office, crept out with great circumspection and disappeared in the shadows.

One afternoon, a week after this time, Sharp lingered behind again after the clerks had left and the office closed. The next morning the first comers noticed a broad mark in the dust on the upstairs floor, and the same mark was observed below stairs near a window.

It appeared as if some heavy and rather bulky object had been dragged along through the limestone dust. A memorandum book with “E. Harris” written on the flyleaf was picked up on the stairs, but nothing particular was thought of any of these signs.

Circulars and advertisements appeared for a long time in the papers asking for information concerning Edward Harris, who left his mother’s home on a certain date and had never been heard of since.

After a while these things were succeeded by affairs of more recent interest, and faded from the public mind.

Sharp died two years ago, respected and regretted. The last two years of his life were clouded with a settled melancholy for which his friends could assign no reason. The bulk of his comfortable fortune was made from the land he obtained by fraud and crime.

The disappearance of the file was a mystery that created some commotion in the Land Office, but he got his patent.

It is a well-known tradition in Austin and vicinity that there is a buried treasure of great value somewhere on the banks of Shoal Creek, about a mile west of the city.

Three young men living in Austin recently became possessed of what they thought was a clue of the whereabouts of the treasure, and Thursday night they repaired to the place after dark and plied the pickaxe and shovel with great diligence for about three hours.

At the end of that time their efforts were rewarded by the finding of a box buried about four feet below the surface, which they hastened to open.

The light of a lantern disclosed to their view the fleshless bones of a human skeleton with clothing still wrapping its uncanny limbs.

They immediately left the scene and notified the proper authorities of their ghastly find.

On closer examination, in the left breast pocket of the skeleton’s coat, there was found a flat, oblong packet of papers, cut through and through in three places by a knife blade, and so completely soaked and clotted with blood that it had become an almost indistinguishable mass.

With the aid of a microscope and the exercise of a little imagination this much can be made out of the letter; at the top of the papers:

B—x a— –rip N—2—92.