

Deaf Smith, the Celebrated Texan Spy.

About two years after the Texas Revolution, a difficulty occurred between the new government and a portion of the people, which threatened the most serious consequences, even the bloodshed and horrors of civil war. Briefly, the case was this:

The constitution had fixed the city of Austin as the permanent capital, where the public archives were to be kept, with the reservation, however, of a power in the President to order their temporary removal in case of danger from the attacks of a foreign enemy, or the force of a sudden insurrection.

Conceiving that in the exceptional emergency had arrived, as the Comanches frequently commit ravages within sight of the capital itself, Houston, who then resided at Washington on the Brazos, dispatched an order commanding his subordinate functionaries to send the State records to the latter place, which he declared was *pro tempore* the seat of government.

It is impossible to describe the stormy excitement which the promulgation of this fiat raised in Austin. The keepers of hotels, grocers, boarding houses, and favor banks, were thunder-struck, maddened to frenzy for the measure would be a death-blow to their prosperity in business; and accordingly they determined at once to take the necessary steps to avert the danger, by opposing the execution of the mandate of Houston. They called a mass meeting of the citizens and farmers of the surrounding country, who were all more or less interested in the question, and after many fiery speeches against the asserted tyranny of the administration, it was unanimously resolved to prevent the removal of the archives by open and armed resistance. To that end they organized a company of four hundred men, one moiety of whom relieved the other at regular periods of duty, to keep constant guard around the State House until the peril had passed by. The commander of this force was one Col. Morton, who had achieved considerable renown in the war for independence, and had still more recently displayed desperate bravery in two duels, in both of which he had cut his antagonist nearly to pieces with the bowie knife. Indeed from the notoriety of his character for revenge, as well as courage, it was thought that President Houston would renounce his purpose, touching the archives, as soon as he should learn who was the leader of the opposition.

Morton, on his part, whose vanity fully equalled his personal prowess, encouraged and justified the prevailing opinion by his boasting, threats. He swore that if the President did succeed in removing the records by the march of an overpowering force, he would then himself hunt him down like a wolf, and shoot him with as little ceremony. He even wrote to the hero of San Jacinto to that effect. The latter replied in a note of laconic brevity.

"If the people of Austin do not send the archives I shall certainly come and take them; and if Col. Morton can take me, he is welcome to wear my cap."

On the reception of this answer the guard was doubled around the State House. Close sentinels were stationed along the road leading to the Capital, the military paraded the streets from morning till night, and a select caucus held permanent session in the City Hall. In short, everything looked as coming tempest.

One day, while matters were in this precarious condition, the caucus of the city hall was surprised by the sudden appearance of a stranger whose mode of entering was as extraordinary as his looks and dress. He next knocked at the closed door—he did not seek admission there at all; but climbing, unseen, a small bushy cupped tree oak which grew beside the wall, he leaped without sound or warning, through a lofty window. He was clothed altogether in buckskin, carried a bag and very heavy rifle in his hand, wore at the bottom of his left suspender a large bowie knife, and had in his leathern belt a couple of pistols half the length of his gun. He was tall, straight as an arrow, active as a rancher in his actions, with dark complexion and luxuriant, jetty hair, with a severe, iron countenance that seemed never to relax known a smile, and eyes of vivid black, wild and piercing as the point of a dagger.

His strange advent inspired a chill of involuntary fear, and many present unobviously grasped the handle of their side arms.

"Who are you that thus presume to intrude among gentlemen, without invitation?" demanded Col. Morton, essaying to cower down the stranger with his eye.

The latter returned his stare with composure, and his long bony fingers on his lips, as a sign, but of what the spectators could not imagine.

"Who are you? Speak, or I will cut an answer out of your heart!" shouted Morton, almost distracted with rage by the cool, sneering gaze of the other, who now removed his finger from his lip, and placed his hand on the hilt of his monstrous knife.

The fiery Colonel then drew his finger and was in the act of advancing upon the stranger when several caught him and held him back, remonstrating.

"Let him alone, Morton, for God's sake—Don't you perceive that he is crazy?"

At this moment, Judge Webb, a man of shrewd intellect and courteous manners, stepped forward and addressed the intruder in the most respectful manner:

"My good friend, I presume you have made a mistake in the house. This is a private meeting where none but members are admitted."

The stranger did not seem to comprehend the words, but he could not fail to understand the mild and deprecating intonation. His rigid features relaxed, and moving to a table in the center of the hall, where there were materials and implements for writing, he seized a pen and traced one line: "I am deaf." He then held it up before the spectators as a sort of apology for his own want of politeness.

Judge Webb took the paper and wrote a question: "Dear sir, will you be so obliging as to inform us what is your business with the present meeting?"

The other replied by delivering a letter, inscribed on the back, "To the citizens of Austin." They broke the seal and read it aloud. It was from Houston, and allowed the usual terse brevity of his style.

"Fellow citizens—Though in error, and deceived by the arts of traitors, I will give you three more days to decide whether you will surrender the public archives. At the end of that time please let me know your decision."

"You were brave enough to break me by your threatening looks ten minutes ago, are you brave enough now to give me satisfaction?"

The stranger penned his reply: "I am at your service."

Morton pounced: "Name your terms?" The stranger traced without a moment's hesitation, "Time, unless this evening; please, the left bank of the Colorado, opposite Austin; weapons, rifles; distance, one hundred yards. Do not fail to be in time."

He then took three steps across the floor and disappeared as he had entered.

"What?" exclaimed Judge Webb, "is it possible, Col. Morton, that you intend to fight that man? He is a mute, if not a positive maniac. Such a meeting, I fear, will sadly tarnish the lustre of your laurels."

"You are mistaken," replied Morton, with a smile; "that mute is a hero, whose fame stands in the record of a dozen battles, and at least half as many bloody drubs. Besides he is the favorite emissary and bosom friend of Houston. If I have the good fortune to kill him, I will think it will tempt the President to return his vote against venturing any more the field of honor."

"You know the man, then. Who is he?" asked twenty voices together.

"Deaf Smith," said Morton coolly. "If what you say is true, you are a madman yourself," exclaimed Webb. "Deaf Smith was never known to miss his mark. He has often brought down ravens in their most rapid flight, and I killed Comanches two hundred and fifty yards distant."

"Say no more," answered Col. Morton, in tones of deep determination; "the thing is all ready settled. I have agreed to meet him—There can be no disgrace in falling before such a shot, and if I succeed, my triumph will owe for the greater glory."

Such was the general habit of feeling prevalent throughout Texas at that period.

Towards evening vast crowds assembled at the place appointed, to witness the hostile meeting, and so great was the popular recklessness of affairs of that sort, that numerous and considerable sums were wagered on the result.

At length the red orb of the summer's sun touched the curved rim of the Western horizon, covering it all with crimson and gold, and filling the air with a flood of burning glory, and then the two mortal antagonists, armed with long, ponderous rifles, took their stations, back to back, and at the preconcerted signal—the waving of a white handkerchief—walked slowly and steadily off in opposite directions, counting their steps until each had measured fifty. They both completed the given number about the same time, and then they wheeled, each to aim and fire when he chose. As the distance was great, both paused for some seconds—long enough for the beholders to dash their eyes from one to the other, and mark the striking contrast.

The face of Col. Morton was calm and smiling, but the smile it bore had a murderous meaning. On the contrary the countenance of Deaf Smith was stern and passionless as ever. A side view of his features might be taken for a profile done in cast iron. The one, too, was dressed in richest cloth, the other in smoke-stained leather. But that made no difference in Texas then; for the heirs of heroic courage were all considered peers, the class of inferior embracing none but cowards.

Presently the two rifles exploded with simultaneous roars. Col. Morton gave a prodigious bound upwards, and fell to the earth a corpse. Deaf Smith stood erect, and immediately began to reload his rifle; and then having finished his brief task he hastened away into the adjacent forest.

Three days afterwards, Gen. Houston accompanied by Deaf Smith and three more men appeared in Austin, and without further opposition removed the State papers.