

AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE

A man stood upon a railroad bridge in Northern Alabama, looking down into the swift waters twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope loosely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout crosstimber above his head, and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the sleepers supporting the metals of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners--two private soldiers of the Federal army, directed by a sergeant, who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff. At a short remove upon the same temporary platform was an officer in the uniform of his rank, armed. He was a captain. A sentinel at each end of the bridge stood with his rifle in the position known as 'support,' that is to say, vertical in front of the left shoulder, the hammer resting on the forearm thrown straight across the chest--a formal and unnatural position, enforcing an erect carriage of the body. It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the centre of the bridge; they merely blockaded the two ends of the foot plank which traversed it.

Beyond one of the sentinels nobody was in sight; the railroad ran straight away into a forest for a hundred yards, then, curving, was lost to view. Doubtless there was an outpost further along. The other bank of the stream was open ground--a gentle acclivity crowned with a stockade of vertical tree trunks, loop-holed for rifles, with a single embrasure through which protruded the muzzle of a brass cannon commanding the bridge. Midway of the slope between bridge and fort were the spectators--a single company of infantry in line, at 'parade rest,' the butts of the rifles on the ground, the barrels inclining slightly backward against the right shoulder, the hands crossed upon the stock. A lieutenant stood at the right of the line, the point of his sword upon the ground, his left hand resting upon his right. Excepting the group of four at the centre of the bridge not a man moved. The company faced the bridge, staring stonily, motionless. The sentinels, facing the banks of the stream, might have seen statues to adorn the bridge. The captain stood with folded arms, silent, observing the work of his subordinates but making no sign. Death is dignitary who, when he comes announced, is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him. In the code of military etiquette silence and fixity are forms of deference.

The man who was engaged in being hanged was apparently about thirty-five years of age. He was civilian, if one might judge from his dress, which was that of a planter. His features were good a straight nose, firm mouth, broad forehead, from which his long, dark hair was combed straight back falling behind his ears to the collar of his well-fitting frock coat. He wore a moustache and point beard, but no whiskers; his eyes were large a dark- grey and had a kindly expression which o would hardly have expected in one whose neck in the hemp. Evidently this was no vulgar assassin .The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of people, and gentlemen are not excluded.

The preparations being complete, the two private soldiers stepped aside and each draw away the plank upon which he had been standing. The sergeant turned to the captain, saluted and placed himself immediately behind that officer, who in turn moved apart one pace. These movements left the condemned man and the sergeant standing on the t ends of the same plank, which spanned three of t cross-ties of the bridge. The end upon which the civilian stood almost, but not quite, reached a fourth. This plank had been held in place by the weight of the captain; it was now held by that of the sergeant. At a signal from the former, the latter would step aside, the plank would tilt and the condemned man go down between two ties [...]

[...] The intellectual part of his nature was already effaced; he had power only to feel, and feeling was torment. He was conscious of motion. Encompassed in a luminous cloud, of which he was now merely the fiery heart, without material substance, he swung through unthinkable arcs of oscillation, like a vast pendulum. Then **all** at once, with terrible suddenness, the light about him shot upward with the noise of a loud splash; a frightful roaring was in his ears, and **all** was cold and dark. The power of thought was restored; he knew that the rope had broken and he had fallen into the stream. There was no additional strangulation; the noose about his neck was already suffocating him, and kept the water from his lungs. To die of hanging at the bottom of a river!-the idea seemed to him ludicrous. He opened his eyes in the blackness and saw above him a gleam of light, but how distant, how inaccessible I He was still sinking, for the light became fainter and fainter until it was a mere glimmer. Then it began to grow and brighten, and he know that he was rising toward the surface -know it with

reluctance, for he was now very comfortable. I To be hanged and drowned,' he thought, I that is not so bad; but I do not wish to be **shot**. No; I will not be shot; that is not fair.'

He was not conscious of **an** effort, but **a** sharp pain in his wrists apprised him that he was trying to free his hands. He **gave** the struggle his attention, as an idler might observe the feat of **a** juggler, without interest in the outcome. What splendid effort! -what magnificent, what superhuman strength! Ah, that was a fine endeavour ! Bravo! The cord fell away; his arms parted and floated **upward**, the hands dimly seen on each side in the growing light. He watched them with a now interest as first one and then the other pounced upon the noose at his neck. They tore it away and thrust it fiercely aside, its undulations resembling those of a water-snake. "Put it back, put it back!" He thought he shouted these words to his bands, for the undoing of the noose had been succeeded by the direst pang which he had yet experienced. His neck ached horribly; his brain was on fire ; his heart, which had been fluttering faintly, gave a great leap, trying to force itself out at his mouth. His whole body was racked and wrenched with an insupportable anguish! But his disobedient hands gave **no** heed to the command. They beat the water vigorously with quick, downward strokes, forcing, him to the surface. He felt his head emerge; his eyes were blinded by the sunlight; his chest expanded convulsively, and with **a** supreme and crowning agony his lungs engulfed a great draught of air, which instantly he expelled in a shriek!

He was now in full possession of his physical senses. They were, indeed, preternaturally keen and alert. Something in the awful disturbance of his organic system had so exalted and refined them that they made record of things never before perceived. He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds **as** they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf-saw the very insects upon them, the locusts, the brilliant bodied flies, the grey spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colours in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass. The humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of the stream, the beating of the dragon flies' wings, the strokes of the water spiders' legs, like oars which had lifted their boat-all these made audible music. A fish slid along beneath his eyes and he heard the rush of its body parting the water.

He had come to the surface facing down the stream; in a moment the visible world seemed to wheel slowly round, himself the pivotal point, and he saw the bridge, the fort, the soldiers upon the bridge, the captain, the sergeant, the two privates, his executioners. They were in silhouette against the blue sky. They shouted and gesticulated, pointing **at** him; the captain had drawn his pistol, but did not **fire**; the others were unarmed. Their movements were grotesque and horrible, their forms gigantic.

Suddenly he heard a sharp report and something struck the water smartly within a few inches of his head, spattering his face with spray. He heard a second report, and saw one of the sentinels with his rifle at his shoulder, a light cloud of blue smoke rising from the muzzle. The man in the water saw the eye of the man on the bridge gazing into his own through the sights of the rifle. He observed that was a grey eye, and remembered having read that grey eyes were keenest and that all famous marksmen had them. Nevertheless, this one had missed.

A counter swirl had caught Farquhar and turn him half round ; he was again looking into the forest on the bank opposite the fort. The sound of a clear high voice in a monotonous singsong now rang o behind him and came across the water with a distinctness that pierced and subdued all other sounds, even the beating of the ripples in his ears. Although no soldier, he had frequented camps enough to know the dread significance of that deliberate, drawling, aspirated chant; the lieutenant on shore was taking a part in the morning's work. How coldly and pitilessly-with what an even, calm intonation, presaging and enforcing tranquillity in the men---with what accurately-measured intervals fell those cruel words: ' Attention, company ...Shoulder arms.... Ready. . . . Aim ... Fire.'

Farquhar dived as deeply as he could. The water roared in his ears like the voice of Niagara yet he heard the dulled thunder of the volley, a rising again toward the surface, met shining bits metal, singularly flattened, oscillating slowly downward. Some of them touched him on the face a hands, then fell away, continuing their descent. One lodged between his collar and neck; it was uncomfortably warm, and he snatched it out.

As he rose to the surface, gasping for breath, he saw that he had been a long time under water was perceptibly farther down stream---nearer to safety. The soldiers had almost finished reloading; metal ramrods flashed all at once in the sunshine they were drawn from the barrels, turned in the air, and thrust into their

sockets. The two sentinels fired again, independently and ineffectually.

The hunted man saw all this over his shoulder; he was now swimming vigorously with the current. His brain was as energetic as his arms and legs; he thought with the rapidity of lightning. "The officer," he reasoned, will not make that martinet's error a second time. It is as easy to dodge a volley as a single shot. He has probably already given the command to fire at will. God help me, I cannot dodge them **all!**"

An appalling splash within two yards of followed by a loud rushing sound, *diminuendo*, seemed to travel back through the air to the fort and died in an explosion which stirred the very river to its deeps! A rising sheet of water, which curved over him, fell down upon him, blinded him, strangled him! The cannon had taken a hand in the As he shook his head free from the commotion smitten water, he heard the deflected shot hum through the air ahead, and in **an** instant it was cracking and smashing the branches in the forest beyond.

"They will not do that again", he thought; "the next time they will use **a** charge of grape. I must keep my eye upon the gun; the smoke will apprise me--the report arrives too late; it lags behind the missile. It is **a** good gun.'

Suddenly he felt himself whirled round and round-spinning like **a** top. The water, the banks, the forest, the now distant bridge, fort and men--all were commingled and blurred. Objects were represented by their colours only; circular horizontal streaks of colour--that was all he saw. He had been caught in **a** vortex and was being whirled on with **a** velocity of advance and gyration which made him giddy and sick. In a few moments he was flung upon the gravel at the foot of the left bank of the stream--the southern bank--and behind **a** projecting point which concealed him from his enemies. The sudden arrest of his motion, the abrasion of one of his hands on the gravel, restored him and he wept with delight. He dug his fingers into the sand, threw it over himself in handfuls and audibly blessed it. It looked like gold, like diamonds, rubies, emeralds; he could think of nothing beautiful which it did not resemble. The trees upon the bank were giant garden plants; he noted **a** definite order in their arrangement, inhaled the fragrance of their blooms. A strange, roseate light shone through the spaces among their trunks, and the wind made in their branches the music of aeolian harps. He had no wish to perfect his escape, was content to remain in that enchanting spot until retaken.

A whizz and rattle of grapeshot among the branches high above his head roused him from his dream. The baffled cannoneer had fired him random farewell. He sprang to his feet, rushed up the sloping bank, and plunged into the forest.

All that day he travelled, laying his course by the rounding sun. The forest seemed interminable; nowhere did he discover a break in it, not even a woodman's road. He had not known that he lived in so wild a region. There **was** something uncanny in the revelation. By nightfall he was fatigued, footsore, famishing. The thought of his wife and children urged him on. At last he found a road which led him in what he knew to be the right direction. It was **as** wide and straight as a city street, yet it seemed untravelled. No fields bordered it, no dwelling anywhere. Not so much **as** the barking of a dog suggested human habitation. The black bodies of the great trees formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating **on** the horizon in a point, like a diagram in a lesson perspective. Overhead, as he looked up through this rift in the wood, shone great golden stars looking unfamiliar and grouped in strange constellations. He was sure they were arranged in some order which had a secret and **malign** significance. The wood on either side was full of singular noises, among **which** once, twice, and again—he distinctly heard whispers in an unknown tongue.

His neck was in pain, and, lifting his hand to it, he found it horribly swollen. He knew that it had a circle of black where the rope had bruised it. His eyes felt congested; he could no longer close them. His tongue was swollen with thirst; he relieved its fever by thrusting it forward from between his teeth into the cool air. How softly, the turf had carpeted untravelled avenue! He could no longer feel the roadway beneath his feet!

Doubtless, despite his suffering, he fell asleep while walking, for now **he** sees another scene-- perhaps he has merely recovered from a delirium. He stands at the gate of his own home. All is as left it, and all bright and beautiful in the morning sunshine. He must have travelled the entire night. As he pushes open the gate and passes up the white walk, he sees a flutter of female garments; his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the verandah to meet him. At the bottom of steps she stands waiting, with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity. Ah, how beautiful she is! He springs forward with extended arms. As he is about to clasp her, he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white **light** blazes all about him, with a sound like the shock of a cannon--then all is darkness and silence!

Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with broken neck, swung gently from side

to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge.

Ambrose Bierce, In the Midst of Life

1842-1914