

AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE

adapted from the story by
Ambrose Bierce

Ambrose Bierce was born in Ohio in 1842. He went to school, a military academy, for just one year. In 1864, during the Civil War between the North and the South, Bierce joined the Army. After the war, he went to California. He wrote political pieces for newspapers. His first short story was published in 1871. That same year he married and went to live in London. After five years in London, he returned to the United States. He worked for the Hearst Newspaper Company on the West Coast. He went to write about the Mexican War in 1814, where he disappeared in the fighting. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" appeared in a collection of short stories *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* in 1891. A second collection, *Can Such Things Be?*, was published in 1893.

I

A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama. He looked down into the river below. The man's hands were tied behind his back. A rope circled his neck. The end of the long rope was tied to part of the wooden bridge above his head.

Next to the man stood two soldiers of the Northern army. A short distance away stood their captain. Two soldiers guarded each end of the bridge. On one bank of the river, other soldiers stood silently, facing the bridge. The two guards at each end of the bridge faced the banks of the river. None of the soldiers moved. The captain, too, stood silent. He watched the work of the two soldiers near him, but he made no sign. All of them were waiting silently for Death. Death is a visitor who must be met with respect. Even soldiers, who see so much death, must show respect to Death. And in the army, silence and stillness are signs of respect.

The man with the rope around his neck was going to be hanged. He was about thirty-five years old. He was not dressed like a soldier. He wore a well-fitting coat. His face was a fine one. He had a straight nose, strong mouth, and dark hair. His large eyes were grey, and looked kind. He did not seem like the sort of man to be hanged. Clearly he was not the usual sort of criminal. But the Army has laws for hanging many kinds of people. And gentlemen are not excused from hanging.

When the two soldiers were ready, they stepped away. The captain faced the condemned man. They stood face to face on a piece of wood. The middle

of the board rested against the edge of the bridge. When the captain stepped off the board, the piece of wood would fall down into the river. The condemned man would fall down after the board. Only the rope around his neck would stop him. He would be hanged by the neck until dead. The man's face had not been covered. His eyes were open. He looked down at the river below. He saw a small piece of wood floating along with the river. How slowly it moved! What a gentle river!

He closed his eyes and thought of his wife and children. Until now, other things had filled his mind: the water, painted gold by the sun ... the soldiers ... the floating wood. After a little while he heard a new sound. A strange metallic sound kept beating through the thoughts of his family. He wondered what it was. It sounded far away, and yet very close. It was as slow as a death-bell ringing. The sound came louder and louder. It seemed to cut into his brain like a knife. He was afraid he would cry out. But it was only his own watch making its little sound.

He opened his eyes. He saw again the water below him. "If I could free my hands," he thought, "I might throw off the rope. I could jump into the river. If I swam quickly underwater, I could escape the bullets. I would reach the river bank, run into the woods and go home. My home, thank God, it still safe from the Northern Army." These thoughts must be written in words here. But they passed as quickly as light through the condemned man's mind.

And then the captain stepped off the board.

II

The condemned man's name was Peyton Farquhar. He was a rich farmer, the last son in an old Alabama family. He owned slaves who worked on his farm. Like other Southern farmers, he believed that slaves were necessary to Southern farming. The Northern government had said that it was against the law to have slaves. Now, North and the South were at war.

Certain work had kept Peyton Farquhar from joining the Southern Army at the beginning of the war. But he was at heart a soldier. He did everything he could to help the South. No job was too low, no adventure too dangerous. One evening, Farquhar and his wife were sitting in the garden. A soldier rode up to the house. He was dressed like other soldiers in the Southern Army. While Mrs. Farquhar went to get him a drink of water, the soldier spoke with Farquhar.

"The Northerners are rebuilding the railroads," the soldier said. "They are getting ready for another advance. They've reached Owl Creek Bridge. They've fixed the bridge and moved in a lot of soldiers. Anyone who attacks the railroad or tries to destroy the bridge will be hanged."

"How far is it to Owl Creek, Bridge?" Farquhar asked.

"About thirty miles."

"Are there soldiers on this side of the bridge?"

"Only a few guards."

"Suppose that a man went around the guards?" Farquhar smiled. "What could he do to stop the advance?"

The soldier thought a moment. Then he said, "I was at the bridge a month ago. I saw a lot of wood that the river had washed against one end of the bridge. It's very dry now, and the wood would burn quickly and well."

The lady had now brought the water. The soldier drank. He thanked her, bowed to Farquhar, and rode away. An hour later, after nightfall, he passed Farquhar's farm Again. He went North in the direction he had come from. He was a Northern soldier.

III

Peyton Farquhar fell down from the bridge. He lost consciousness. He was like one already dead. He was awakened—hours later, it seemed to him—by the great pain in his neck. Pain passed through his body like rivers of fire. He was conscious of a fullness in his head. He could not think. He could only feel. He was conscious of motion. He seemed to be falling through a red cloud. Then suddenly the light flew upward with the noise of a loud splash. A fearful noise was in his ears. All was cold and dark. The power of thought came back to him. He knew the rope had broken, and he had fallen into the river. The rope around his neck was cutting off the air. To die of hanging at the bottom of a river! No! Impossible! He opened his eyes in the darkness. He was, light far, far above him. He was still going down, for the light grew smaller and smaller. But then it grew brighter and he knew he was coming back up to the top of the river. Now he felt sorry to be coming out of the water. He had been so comfortable. "To be hanged and drowned," he thought. "That is not so bad. But I do not want to be shot. No, I will not be shot. That's not fair!"

He was not conscious of his actions until he felt pain in his hands. Then he realized that he was trying to free his hands. At last the rope fell off. His arms floated upward; he could see his hands. He watched with interest. His hands were trying to untie the rope around his neck. They pulled off the rope and it floated away. "Put it back, put it back," he felt himself crying. His neck hurt badly. His mind was on fire, his heart beat wildly enough to leave his body. His whole body was in great pain. But his hands pushed him up out, of the water. And he took a great breath of air.

Now he was fully conscious. His five senses seemed unusually clear. The pain his body had felt made him see and feel the beauty around him. He felt the water against his skin. He heard the soft sound as it hit his neck and shoulders. He looked into the forest on the bank and could see each, tree, each leaf. He could even see small forest animals between the trees. A fish swam before his eyes. He noticed how the sunlight shone on the fish's silver skin.

He was facing away from the bridge when his head came out of the water. Now he turned around. He saw small men on the bridge, dark against the blue sky. They cried out and pointed at him. The captain took out his gun but did not shoot.

Then, suddenly, he heard a loud bang. Something hit the water near his head. Water splashed in his face. He heard a second shot and a light blue cloud rose from the gun. Then Farquhar heard the captain call to the men: "Ready, men ... Shoot!"

Farquhar swam deep under the water. The water sounded loud in his ears. But even above the sound of the water he heard the shots. He swam down the river.

Later he swam to the top again. He saw he was quite far from the bridge. The soldiers were still pointing their guns at him.

The captain will not order them to shoot together again," he thought. "It's as easy to escape many bullets as one. He'll order them to shoot as they wish. God help me, I cannot escape them all."

Suddenly he was caught by a strong current in the river. The current pulled him under the water. It carried him down the river and turned him over and over. At last the force of the current pushed him up onto the bank.

He lay on the bank, crying with happiness and tiredness. He dug his fingers into river bank. The small stones felt like jewels. The trees looked to him like a-finest of gold. The air smelled clear and sweet, and a pink light shone through the trees.

The sound of bullets in the trees awoke him. He rose to his feet, frightened again, and disappeared into the forest.

All that day he traveled. The forest seemed endless. He could find no road. He hadn't realized before now that he lived near such a wild place.

When night began to fall, he was very tired and hungry. The thought of his wife and children helped him to continue. At last he found a road that seemed to lead in the right direction. It was as wide and straight as a city street. But it seemed untraveled. There were no fields, no houses nearby. The big black trees formed a straight wall on both sides. Overhead, great golden stars shone in the sky. The stars looked unfamiliar. He was sure that they were grouped in some strange order which meant bad luck. From inside the forest came strange noises. Among them he heard people talking in an unknown language.

His neck was in pain. He knew that the rope had left a black circle on his skin. He could not close his eyes. His tongue was dry; he felt very thirsty. Grass seemed to cover the road now; it was soft under his feet.

Did he fall asleep while he was walking? Now he sees something else. Perhaps he was wakened from a dream. Now he stands not far from the door of his own house. Everything looks just as he left it, bright and beautiful in the morning sunshine. He must have traveled through the whole night. As he walks toward the door, his wife appears to meet him. She stands waiting, cool and sweet, silent and

still. She holds out her arms to him with a smile of happiness. Ah! how beautiful she is! He moves toward her with open arms. He moves slowly, closer, closer. At the moment he touches her, he feels a great pain at the back of his neck. A white light flames all about him....

There was a loud bang, then silence. All was darkness...

Peyton Farquhar was dead. His body, with a broken neck, hung from a rope beneath Owl Creek Bridge.