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An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

By Mr Ambrose Bierce

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"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is a short story by American author Ambrose Bierce (1842-1913). Originally published by the The San Francisco Examiner in 1890, it was first collected in Bierce's 1891 book *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. The story, which is set during the Civil War, is famous for its irregular time sequence and twist ending. It is Bierce's most anthologized story. Set during the American Civil War, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is the story of Peyton Farquhar, a Confederate sympathizer condemned to death by hanging from Owl Creek Bridge. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist stands bound at the bridge's edge. It is later revealed that after a disguised Union scout enlisted him to attempt to demolish the bridge, he was caught in the act. In the first part of the story, a gentleman planter in his mid thirties is standing on a railroad bridge in Alabama. Six military men and a company of infantry men are present. The man is to be hanged from the bridge. As he is waiting, he thinks of his wife and children. Then he is distracted by a tremendous noise. He can not identify this noise, other than that it sounds like the clanging of a blacksmith's hammer on the anvil. He cannot tell if it was far away or nearby. He finds himself apprehensively awaiting each strike, which seem to grow further and further apart. It is revealed that this noise is the ticking of his watch. Then, an escape plan flashes through his mind: "throw off the noose and spring into the stream. By diving I could evade the bullets and, swimming vigorously, take to the woods and get away home." His thoughts stray back to his wife and children. The soldiers drop him down. The story flashes back in time: Peyton Farquhar lives in the South and is a Confederate supporter. He goes out of his way to perform services to support the Confederate cause. One day, a gray-clad soldier appears at his house and tells Farquhar that Union soldiers in the area have been repairing the railroads, including the one over Owl Creek Bridge. Interested, Farquhar asks if it is possible to sabotage the bridge, to which the soldier replies that he could burn it down. When the soldier leaves, it is revealed that he is a Union scout who has lured Farquhar into a trap, as anyone caught interfering with the railroads would face execution. When he is hanged, the rope breaks. Farquhar falls into the water. While underwater, he seems to take little interest in the fact that his hands, which now have a life of their own, are freeing themselves and untying the rope from around his neck. Once he finally reaches the surface, he realizes his senses are superhuman. He can see the individual blades of grass and the colors of bugs on the leaves of trees, despite the fact that he is whirling around in a river. Realizing that the men are shooting at him, he escapes and makes it to dry land. He travels through an uninhabited and seemingly unending forest, attempting to reach his home 30 miles away. During his journey through the day and night, he is fatigued, footsore, and famished, urged on by the thought of his wife and children. He begins experiencing strange physiological events,

hearing unusual noises from the wood, and believes he has fallen asleep while walking. He wakes to see his perfectly preserved home, with his beautiful and youthful wife outside. As he runs forward to reach her, he suddenly feels a searing pain in his neck; a white light flashes, and everything goes black. It is revealed that Farquhar never escaped at all; he imagined the entire third part of the story during the time between falling through the bridge and the noose finally breaking his neck.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce (June 24, 1842 – circa 1914) was an American editorialist, journalist, short story writer, fabulist, and satirist. He wrote the short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and compiled a satirical lexicon, *The Devil's Dictionary*. His vehemence as a critic, his motto "Nothing matters", and the sardonic view of human nature that informed his work, all earned him the nickname "Bitter Bierce". Despite his reputation as a searing critic, Bierce was known to encourage younger writers, including poet George Sterling and fiction writer W. C. Morrow. Bierce employed a distinctive style of writing, especially in his stories. His style often embraces an abrupt beginning, dark imagery, vague references to time, limited descriptions, impossible events and the theme of war. In 1913, Bierce traveled to Mexico to gain first-hand experience of the Mexican Revolution. While traveling with rebel troops, he disappeared without a trace. Early life Bierce was born in a log cabin at Horse Cave Creek in Meigs County, Ohio on June 24, 1842, to Marcus Aurelius Bierce (1799–1876) and Laura Sherwood Bierce. His mother was a descendant of William Bradford. His parents were a poor but literary couple who instilled in him a deep love for books and writing. The boy grew up in Kosciusko County, Indiana, attending high school at the county seat, Warsaw. He was the tenth of thirteen children whose father gave all of them names beginning with the letter "A". In order of birth, the Bierce siblings were Abigail, Amelia, Ann, Addison, Aurelius, Augustus, Almeda, Andrew, Albert, Ambrose, Arthur, Adelia, and Aurelia. He left home at age fifteen to become a "printer's devil" at a small Ohio newspaper.

Users Review

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Eula Hunter:

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