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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.
The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

Content Note

This adaptation is based on a historical literary work. It may contain expressions, attitudes, or depictions that some readers may consider inappropriate or offensive by today's standards. Such elements have been retained or reflected where necessary in order to preserve the historical and literary character of the original work.

Source Text

Original work: An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge; Chickamauga; A Horseman in the Sky; The Damned Thing; The Death of Halpin Frayser; The Moonlit Road; One of the Missing; Parker Adderson, Philosopher; The Secret of Macarger's Gulch; A Watcher by the Dead
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Ambrose Bierce, *Selected Short Stories by Ambrose Bierce* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

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An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

Part 1 — The Man on the Bridge

A man stood on a railroad bridge in northern Alabama. He looked down at the fast water below him. His hands were tied behind his back with a cord. A rope was around his neck, and the other end of the rope was tied to a strong piece of wood above him.

The man was not alone on the bridge. Two soldiers stood near him, and a sergeant gave them orders. A captain stood a little farther away, watching everything in silence. At each end of the bridge, another soldier stood with his gun, keeping anyone from coming near.

The bridge crossed a narrow stream, but the water moved quickly. It shone in the early light and turned under the bridge in small, angry circles. The man could hear it below him. The sound seemed very near, but also strangely far away.

On one side of the stream, the railroad went straight into a forest. After a short distance, it turned and disappeared among the trees. On the other side, the land rose gently to a small fort made of logs. A cannon pointed toward the bridge from an opening in the fort.

Near the fort stood a company of soldiers. They were lined up in order, with their guns resting against their shoulders. They did not speak, and they did not move. Their faces were turned toward the bridge, but they looked more like stone figures than living men.

The captain also stood still. His arms were folded, and his face showed no feeling. He watched the sergeant and the two soldiers as they finished their work. Everything was quiet and careful, as if this were not the killing of a man but some formal military duty.

The man who was going to die looked about thirty-five years old. He was not wearing a soldier’s uniform. His clothes were those of a rich country gentleman, the kind of man who owned land and lived in a large house. His hair was dark, and his face was calm and handsome.

There was kindness in his eyes, even now. He did not look like a common criminal. But war does not only kill common criminals. In war, a gentleman can be hanged as easily as any other man.

The soldiers had made a simple plan. Loose boards lay across the wooden supports of the bridge. The prisoner stood on one board. The sergeant stood on the other end of the same board, holding it in place with his weight.

When the captain gave the sign, the sergeant would step away. Then the board would move, and the prisoner would fall between the wooden supports. The rope around his neck would stop him before he reached the water.

The man's face had not been covered. His eyes had not been covered either. He could see everything clearly: the soldiers, the bridge, the fort, the cannon, the forest, and the water below. He looked down at the board under his feet and understood how little held him up.

Then he looked again at the stream. A small piece of wood floated on the water and moved away from him. His eyes followed it. It seemed to move very slowly, and he thought, strangely, that the stream itself was slow.

He closed his eyes. He wanted his last thoughts to be of his wife and children. He tried to push everything else away from his mind. But the world would not leave him alone.

The bright water, the soft morning light, the mist under the banks, the soldiers, and the small piece of floating wood all came back into his thoughts. Then another sound reached him. It was sharp and hard, like metal striking metal.

He did not know what the sound was. It seemed far away, and yet it also seemed very close. It came again and again, always with the same clear ring. Each time, there was a long silence before the next sound.

The silences became worse than the sound itself. He waited for the next ring with fear and anger. The sound grew stronger in his ears. It hurt him like a small knife.

At last he understood. It was the ticking of his own watch. In that terrible moment, each small beat of time seemed wide and deep. A second no longer felt like a second.

He opened his eyes and looked once more at the water. A thought came to him quickly, not like a careful plan, but like a sudden flash. If he could free his hands, he might pull the rope from his neck. Then he could jump into the stream.

He imagined the whole escape. He would fall into the water and dive deep. The soldiers would shoot, but the bullets might miss him. He could swim under the water, come up far away, and reach the bank.

After that, he could run into the forest. The trees would hide him. He knew the land, or believed he knew it well enough. His home was still beyond the enemy lines, and his wife and children were there.

The thought of his home filled him with sudden hope. He saw his wife in his mind. He saw his children near her. For one brief moment, the bridge and the soldiers seemed less real than the road that might lead him back to them.

But the soldiers were still there. The rope was still around his neck. His hands were still tied behind his back. The captain was still watching.

The captain gave a small nod to the sergeant. The movement was quiet and quick. It was enough.

The sergeant stepped aside.

Part 2 — The Soldier at the Gate

The man on the bridge was named Peyton Farquhar. He was a rich farmer from an old Alabama family. He owned land, and he had a good name among people near him. He was not a soldier, but his heart was with the South in the war.

Farquhar owned slaves, as many rich planters did in that place and time. Because of this, and because of his family and his politics, he strongly supported the Southern side. He wanted the South to win. He believed that he should help it in any way he could.

But he had not joined the army. The story does not need to tell every reason for this. It is enough to know that something had kept him at home. Still, he hated being only a civilian while other men were fighting.

He wanted action. He wanted danger. He wanted a chance to do something

brave and useful. In his own mind, he was already a soldier, even though he wore no uniform.

War makes some people think in strange ways. Farquhar believed that almost any act could be right if it helped his side. A small act, a secret act, even a dangerous act, seemed honorable to him if it hurt the enemy. He waited for such a chance.

One evening, he and his wife were sitting on a rough wooden seat near the entrance to their land. The evening was quiet. The road passed near their gate, and the house stood behind them in calm country light. For a little while, the war seemed far away.

Then a soldier rode up to the gate. His clothes were gray with dust, and he looked tired from travel. He asked for a drink of water. Mrs. Farquhar rose at once and went to get it for him.

While she was away, Farquhar stepped closer to the man. He wanted news from the front. Any word about the army, the roads, or the enemy interested him deeply. His voice was eager when he asked what was happening.

The soldier told him that the Northern army was repairing the railroads. They were getting ready to move forward again. They had reached Owl Creek Bridge and had repaired it. They had also built a small fort on the north side of the stream.

Then the soldier gave him more important news. The commander had made a strict order. Any civilian who damaged the railroad, the bridges, the tunnels, or the trains would be hanged at once. The soldier said he had seen the order himself.

Farquhar listened closely. The words should have warned him, but they did something else. They made the bridge seem important. They made him think that one brave civilian might be able to harm the enemy.

“How far is Owl Creek Bridge?” he asked.

“About thirty miles,” the soldier said.

Farquhar asked if there were many soldiers on this side of the stream. The soldier said there was only a small guard post on the railroad, about half a mile away. At the near end of the bridge, there was only one guard.

Farquhar smiled a little. He tried to make his question sound light, almost like

a joke. He asked what a civilian could do if he passed the guard post and dealt with the soldier at the bridge.

The soldier thought for a moment. Then he said that the winter flood had carried a large amount of wood against the wooden support at one end of the bridge. The wood was now dry. It would burn very easily.

These words entered Farquhar's mind like fire entering dry grass. He could already see the bridge burning. He could see the railroad broken. He could imagine the enemy delayed, and he could imagine himself as the man who had done it.

Mrs. Farquhar returned with the water. The soldier drank it and thanked her politely. Then he bowed to her husband. After that, he rode away down the road.

The evening grew darker. The house, the gate, and the road slowly lost their clear shapes. Farquhar may have watched the place where the soldier had disappeared. He may have stood there thinking of the bridge, the guard, and the dry wood.

About an hour later, after night had fallen, the same soldier passed the plantation again. This time he was riding north, back in the direction from which he had first come. No one stopped him. No one knew the truth.

The man was not a Southern soldier. He was a Federal scout.

Part 3 — Into the Water

Peyton Farquhar fell straight down through the open space in the bridge. At once, everything left him. He did not think, and he did not feel like a living man. For a short time, or what seemed to him a very long time, he was like a dead body falling through the air.

Then pain brought him back. Something was pressing hard around his neck. He could not breathe, and terrible pain ran from his throat through his whole body. His head felt full, hot, and ready to burst.

He knew that he was moving, but he did not yet understand where he was. Light seemed to be around him, then above him, then gone. A loud sound filled

his ears. Suddenly the world became cold and dark, and he understood that he was in the water.

The rope had broken. He had fallen into the stream instead of hanging under the bridge. But the rope was still tight around his neck, and it still held his throat shut. He thought, with a strange kind of anger, that it was not fair to be hanged and drowned at the same time.

He opened his eyes under the water. Far above him, he saw a weak light. At first the light moved farther away, and he knew he was sinking. Then it grew brighter, and he understood that his body was rising again toward the surface.

He did not clearly decide to free his hands. His body seemed to do it for him. A sharp pain in his wrists told him that he was pulling against the cord. He watched his own struggle almost as if another man were doing it.

Then the cord came loose. His arms moved apart and floated upward in the water. His hands went at once to the rope around his neck. They pulled at it wildly, tore it away, and pushed it from him.

The pain that followed was worse than before. His neck burned, his head seemed full of fire, and his heart beat hard in his chest. For a moment he almost wanted the rope back, because the sudden freedom hurt so much. But his hands did not obey that thought.

They beat the water again and again. His body rose quickly. His head broke through the surface, and sunlight struck his eyes. His chest opened, he took in a great breath, and then he cried out.

Now all his senses seemed strangely strong. He felt every small touch of water on his face. He heard each little sound the stream made around him. He saw the trees on the bank, and even the leaves seemed clear and sharp.

He noticed insects on the branches. He saw drops of water shining on the grass. He heard small wings moving and small feet touching the surface of the stream. It was as if the whole world had become too bright and too loud.

The current turned him slowly. The forest moved out of his sight, and the bridge came into view again. He saw the captain, the sergeant, and the soldiers above him. They were pointing at him and calling out.

A shot cracked through the air. Water jumped up very near his face. Then another shot came, and he saw one of the guards aiming at him from the bridge. The man had missed, but Farquhar knew the next shot might not miss.

The current turned him again, and he faced away from the bridge. Then he heard a clear voice from the bank. It was the voice of an officer giving orders to the soldiers. The words came slowly and coldly across the water.

“Company! Attention! Shoulder arms! Ready! Aim! Fire!” Farquhar knew enough about soldiers to understand what those words meant. He did not wait for the bullets. He took a deep breath and dived under the water.

The river roared around him. Even under the surface, he heard the heavy sound of many guns firing together. Small pieces of hot metal passed near him in the water. One touched his neck, and he pulled it away quickly.

When he came up again, he was farther down the stream. That gave him hope. The soldiers were reloading their guns, and the two guards were firing by themselves. Their shots still came, but the moving water was carrying him away.

He began to swim hard with the current. His arms and legs worked quickly, but his mind worked even faster. He thought the officer would soon order the men to fire whenever they could. A man might avoid one shot or one group of shots, but he could not avoid them all.

Then something struck the water close beside him with a heavy splash. A great wave rose over his head and fell on him. He was blinded and almost choked. The cannon at the fort had fired at him.

He shook the water from his face and looked back. The shot had passed him and gone into the forest ahead. Branches cracked and broke where it struck. Farquhar knew that the next cannon shot might be worse.

Suddenly the current caught him in a turning place. He spun round and round, so fast that the bridge, the trees, the soldiers, and the sky became only streaks of color. He felt sick and helpless. He could do nothing but let the water take him.

A moment later, he was thrown onto gravel near the bank. The sudden stop hurt his hand, but the pain brought his mind back clearly. He dug his fingers into the sand and small stones. To him, they seemed more beautiful than anything he

had ever seen.

He lay there for a little while, hidden from the soldiers by a point of land. He almost forgot that he still had to escape. The trees seemed wonderful, the air seemed sweet, and even the ground under his hands felt like a gift. He was alive, and for that moment it was enough.

Then small shot tore through the branches above him. Leaves and bits of wood fell around him. The cannon had spoken one last time. Farquhar jumped to his feet, climbed the bank, and ran into the forest.

Part 4 — The Road Home

Farquhar ran into the forest as fast as his weak body allowed. Branches struck his face and arms, but he did not stop. Behind him, the river, the bridge, and the soldiers seemed to fall away into another world. Before him there were only trees, shadow, and the hope of home.

He did not know exactly where he was. Still, he believed that if he kept moving, he would find his way. The sun was rising higher, and he used it to choose his direction. He thought of his wife and children, and that thought pulled him forward like a hand.

All day he walked through the forest. The trees seemed endless. He found no open field, no road made by carts, and no small house among the woods. He had not known that the country near his home could be so wild.

The deeper he went, the stranger the forest seemed. There were no voices, no dogs, and no sound of work. Sometimes he stopped and listened, hoping to hear a human sound. But he heard only birds, insects, and the movement of leaves.

His body was full of pain. His neck hurt badly, and every breath reminded him of the rope. His wrists were sore from the cord, and his clothes were heavy and torn. Still, he kept walking, because stopping felt more dangerous than pain.

At times he thought he heard men behind him. He would turn quickly and stare into the trees. Nothing moved there except shadows and thin branches. Then he would begin again, faster than before, afraid that the soldiers were still searching

for him.

The day grew long. The sun moved across the sky, and Farquhar followed its course as best he could. He was hungry, thirsty, and tired to the point of falling. Yet the picture of his wife standing at home would not leave him.

By nightfall, he was almost unable to walk. His feet hurt, and each step felt slow and heavy. Then, at last, he found a road. It ran in the direction that he believed would lead him home.

The road was wide and straight, almost like a street in a town. But no one seemed to use it. There were no houses beside it, no fields, no fences, and no marks of wheels. The trees stood on both sides like dark walls.

Far ahead, the two lines of trees seemed to meet at one point. Farquhar walked between them as if he were walking down a long black passage. Above him, through the opening in the trees, the stars shone with a hard golden light. They did not look like the stars he knew.

He looked up at them and felt fear again. Their shapes seemed strange, as if they had been placed there to send a secret message. He did not understand the message, but he felt that it was not kind. The forest beside the road also seemed full of small, hidden sounds.

Once he thought he heard whispers. Then he heard them again. The words were not English, and he could not understand them. Yet he felt that the voices were speaking about him.

His neck hurt more and more. He lifted one hand and touched it. The skin was swollen, and he knew there must be a dark mark where the rope had been. His eyes felt hot and wide, and he could not close them easily.

His tongue was swollen with thirst. He pushed it out between his teeth to feel the cool night air. Even that small coolness gave him some relief. Under his feet, the road felt strangely soft, as if he were no longer truly touching the ground.

He may have fallen asleep while still walking. Or perhaps pain and tiredness had taken his mind away from the road. Suddenly the scene changed. He was no longer in the dark forest.

He stood at the gate of his own home. Morning light lay bright on everything.

The house looked just as he remembered it. The white path, the grass, the trees, and the veranda were all peaceful and beautiful.

He opened the gate and walked up the path. His heart rose inside him. He had escaped the bridge, the river, the guns, and the forest. He had crossed the long night and had come home at last.

Then he saw a woman's dress move near the veranda. His wife stepped down to meet him. She looked fresh, cool, and lovely in the morning light. A smile of deep joy was on her face.

Farquhar reached out his arms. He wanted to hold her and feel that all his suffering was over. She stood at the bottom of the steps, waiting for him with grace and love. To him, she seemed more beautiful than anything in the world.

He sprang forward to take her in his arms. At that moment, he felt a terrible blow on the back of his neck. A white light burst around him, bright as fire. A sound like a cannon filled the world.

Then there was darkness. Then there was silence. Peyton Farquhar was dead. His body, with a broken neck, swung gently under the wooden beams of Owl Creek Bridge.

Chickamauga

Part 1 — The Child Goes to War

One sunny autumn afternoon, a small child walked away from his rough home. The house stood in a little field, near the edge of a forest. No one saw him go. He felt happy because, for the first time that day, no grown person was watching him.

To the child, the forest was not only a forest. It was a new country, full of adventure. He felt free there, and freedom made him brave. Every tree, bush, and open place seemed to invite him farther in.

The child was a boy, about six years old. His father was a poor farmer, but he had once been a soldier. In his younger days, the father had fought in wars, and he still loved stories and pictures of battle. The boy had seen those pictures and had learned from them in his own childish way.

He had made himself a wooden sword. To an adult, it may not have looked much like a sword. But to the boy, it was a fine weapon. He carried it proudly, as if he were a great officer leading men into battle.

He stopped often in the sunny spaces between the trees. There he stood with his feet apart and raised his wooden sword. He attacked enemies that no one else could see. Then he stepped back, turned, and defended himself from other enemies who were just as unreal.

Because these enemies were only in his mind, he always defeated them. This made him even braver. He moved deeper into the forest, following his imaginary army. He did not know that real soldiers sometimes make the same mistake: they push too far after a victory and forget the danger.

At last he came to a wide, shallow stream. The water moved quickly over stones. To the boy, the stream was not just water. It was a barrier between him and the enemy he was chasing.

For a moment he stopped at the bank and looked across. Then he saw some large stones in the stream, close enough for a step or a jump. He began to cross. The water ran around the stones and made small bright lines in the sun.

He stepped from one stone to another. Sometimes he stretched his little legs as far as he could. Sometimes he nearly slipped, but he did not fall. At last he reached the other side and felt proud of himself.

Now the battle began again. He rushed forward with his wooden sword. He struck at the air, cut down invisible soldiers, and drove the whole enemy army before him. In his mind, he was not a lost child. He was a conqueror.

But after the victory, he should have turned back. He should have crossed the stream again and gone home. Instead, his courage carried him on. He walked away from the stream and followed a path into thicker woods.

Then a new enemy appeared. It sat directly in front of him on the path. It was small, still, and very strange to his eyes. Its ears stood straight up, and its front paws were lifted before its body.

It was only a rabbit. But the child did not know that rabbits are harmless. To him, the animal looked terrible. The long ears frightened him more than any enemy in his game.

He cried out and turned to run. He did not know where he was going. He only wanted to get away from the rabbit. He ran through bushes and small trees, calling for his mother in broken cries.

The branches tore his soft skin. Thorns scratched his face and hands. His little heart beat hard, and tears filled his eyes. Soon he could not see clearly, and he stumbled again and again.

He was lost. The forest, which had seemed friendly and exciting, now closed around him. Every bush looked the same. Every opening seemed to lead to another dark place.

For more than an hour, he wandered through the rough undergrowth. Sometimes he pushed forward with both hands. Sometimes he stopped and sobbed. He still held the wooden sword, but now it no longer felt like a weapon.

At last he came to a narrow space between two rocks, not far from the stream. He was too tired to go on. His fear had become heavy and dull. He lay down there, still holding the sword in one hand.

He cried for a little while longer. Then the crying became softer. His eyes

closed, and he fell asleep on the ground. Above him, birds sang in the trees, and squirrels ran along the branches as if nothing sad had happened.

Far away, there was a low, heavy sound. It was like thunder, but it did not come from a storm. The child did not hear it in his sleep, and he would not have understood it if he had heard it. Somewhere beyond the forest, real war was moving.

Back at the little farm, people were searching in fear. White people and black people looked through the fields and near the hedges. They called and searched, but the child did not answer. His mother's heart was breaking because her little boy was gone.

Part 2 — The Crawling Men

Hours passed while the child slept between the rocks. When he woke, evening had come. The air was cooler, and his arms and legs felt stiff. Fear was still in him, but he had rested, and he no longer cried.

He stood up and looked around. The place was not the same as it had been in the bright afternoon. The trees were darker now, and the spaces between them seemed deep and strange. The stream was near him, but he did not want to go back across it.

A thin white mist was rising from the water. It moved slowly above the stream like smoke without fire. The child looked at it and felt afraid. Instead of going toward the water, he turned away from it and went toward a more open place.

On his right was the stream. On his left, the land rose gently with a few trees standing on it. Twilight lay over everything, and the forest beyond looked black and closed. The child did not know where he was, but some blind wish to move made him go forward.

Then he saw something in front of him. It was moving slowly across the ground. At first he thought it might be a large animal. Perhaps it was a dog, or a pig, or maybe even a bear.

He had seen pictures of bears and had once wished to meet one. But this thing

did not move like the bears in pictures. Its body seemed heavy and wrong. Its slow, broken movement made him stop.

He stood still and watched. As the thing came nearer, his fear grew less. It had no long ears like the rabbit. That was enough to make it seem less terrible to him.

Then he saw another shape behind it. After that came another, and another. Soon there were many of them, moving through the open ground. They were not animals.

They were men. But they did not walk like men. Some moved on their hands and knees. Some used only their hands and dragged their legs behind them.

Others tried to rise, but could not stand. They lifted themselves a little, then fell forward again. No two moved in exactly the same way. Yet all of them moved slowly toward the stream.

They came alone, in pairs, and in small groups. Some stopped for a little while, and others passed them. Then the ones who had stopped began to move again. Farther back, more and more dark shapes came out of the forest.

The child saw them by dozens. Then he saw that there were hundreds. The whole open place seemed to be moving toward the water. The black woods behind them looked as if they would never stop giving out more men.

Some men stopped and did not move again. They lay still on the ground. The child did not understand that they were dead. To him, they were simply men who had stopped playing this strange game.

Others lifted their hands in strange ways. Some touched their heads. Some held their arms upward and then let them fall. Some turned their open hands toward the sky, as if asking for help from someone above them.

A grown person would have understood more. A grown person would have seen pain, wounds, and death. The child saw only that these were men, and because they were men, he was not very afraid. They wore strange clothes, but that also interested him.

He moved among them freely. He bent down and looked into their faces. Many faces were very white. Many had dark red marks on them.

This made him think of a painted clown he had seen at a circus. The memory

pleased him. He laughed as he looked at them. He did not know that there was anything cruel in his laughter.

The men paid no attention to him. They kept moving toward the stream. Their faces were serious, empty, or full of pain, but they made almost no sound. The child could not understand the deep difference between his small joy and their suffering.

He remembered another kind of game. At home, men had sometimes crawled on their hands and knees to amuse him. He had climbed on their backs and pretended they were horses. Now he thought he could play the same game again.

He came up behind one of the crawling men. With a quick movement, he climbed onto the man's back. For one second, he sat there proudly, like a little rider. Then the man sank down hard upon his chest.

The man rose again with a sudden angry movement. He threw the child off his back and onto the ground. The child fell, rolled over, and looked up in surprise. The man turned his face toward him.

What the child saw at last frightened him. The lower part of the man's face was terribly hurt. His mouth and chin were not as they should be. Blood covered his throat and chest.

The man lifted himself to his knees and shook his fist. His eyes were fierce, but his body was weak. The child jumped to his feet and ran behind a tree nearby. From there, he looked out with new and serious fear.

The wounded men kept moving. They dragged themselves down the slope toward the stream. They were slow, broken, and silent. In the dim light, they looked less like men than like large dark insects crawling over the ground.

The child no longer laughed. He held the tree with one hand and watched them pass. His wooden sword was still with him, but he did not raise it now. The army in his game had become something he did not understand.

Still, he did not run away. The strange march drew his eyes and held him there. One by one, and group by group, the men passed through the evening silence. They moved toward the water without speaking, and the child watched them go.

Part 3 — The Burning Home

The child came out from behind the tree and followed the crawling men. He did not walk close to the wounded man who had frightened him. Instead, he stayed a little to one side and watched the strange army move toward the stream. The evening was darker now, but a red light had begun to shine beyond the trees.

The red light interested him. It rose and fell behind the black line of the forest. Sometimes it grew bright, and sometimes it became weaker. To the child, it seemed like a great fire made for joy and wonder.

The wounded men also moved toward that light, though most of them first wanted the water. Their hands pulled at the ground. Their knees pressed into the mud. Their bodies left dark marks behind them as they dragged themselves forward.

Near the stream, the ground was soft and broken. Many feet had passed over it before. Men and horses had crossed there earlier in the day, first going one way and then coming back again. The child did not understand these signs.

He saw blankets, broken guns, bags, and other things lying on the ground. To him, they were only strange objects left by the men. He did not know that armies leave such things when they hurry away from danger. He did not know that a great battle had passed close to him while he slept.

Thousands of soldiers had moved through the forest. They had marched near the place where he lay between the rocks. Some had almost stepped on him. The sound of guns, cannon, shouting, and death had filled the air, but he had slept through it all.

Now only the hurt and dying were left behind. They moved slowly toward the stream with the last strength in their bodies. Some reached the water and put their faces into it. They drank like animals because they were too weak to lift water in their hands.

Some did not lift their faces again. Their heads stayed in the stream, and their bodies lay still on the bank. The child looked at them with wide eyes. He did not understand that they had drowned because they were too weak to move.

The red light grew stronger. Smoke rose above the trees and turned the mist over the stream into a shining cloud. The water itself looked red in places. Some stones in the stream also looked red, but this was not only the light of the fire.

The child crossed the stream on the stones. He stepped quickly and eagerly, just as he had done earlier in the day. But now the stones were wet and dark. Some were stained by the blood of wounded men who had crossed before him.

When he reached the other side, he turned back and looked at his army. The strongest men had reached the water. Others were still crawling through the open ground. Many more lay still and did not move at all.

The child lifted his little cap and waved it. He wanted to encourage them. Then he pointed his wooden sword toward the red light, as if he were leading them to victory. In his mind, he was still their commander.

He turned away and entered the belt of trees. The firelight made the woods easier to pass through. The tree trunks were black, and the spaces between them glowed red. His own small shadow moved beside him and behind him.

He climbed over a fence and ran across a field. The red light now filled the whole place. He turned once or twice to look at his shadow, and it turned with him. This pleased him, and for a moment he played with it as if it were another child.

Then he came near a burning house. The roof had fallen in, and flames moved up from the broken walls. Sparks flew into the night. The heat pushed against his face and made him stop at a distance.

The sight filled him with wild pleasure. He had never seen anything so bright and powerful. The flames rose, bent, and rose again, as if they were dancing. The child danced too, moving his small arms and feet in imitation of the fire.

He wanted to help the fire. He looked around for wood and other things to throw into it. But everything he found was too heavy, or the heat would not let him come close enough. At last, in sudden disappointment, he threw his wooden sword into the flames.

The sword disappeared. His great game was over, though he did not yet understand why. He stood still for a moment, watching the place where the sword

had gone. Then his eyes moved to the smaller buildings nearby.

Those buildings seemed familiar. At first he felt only surprise, as if he had seen them in a dream. Then something in his mind turned. The field, the fence, the trees, and the burning house all took their true places.

He knew the place now. The burning house was his own home. The fire was not a wonderful new thing made for play. It was the ruin of the place where he had lived.

He ran around the burning house with unsteady steps. Near the light of the flames, he saw something lying on the ground. It was the body of a woman. Her face was turned upward, and her hands were stretched out in the grass.

It was his mother. Her dark hair was loose and full of blood. Her clothes were torn and pushed out of place. Her head had been terribly wounded by a shell.

The child stood over her and looked down. His little hands moved in the air with wild, helpless motions. His mouth opened, and strange cries came from him. They were not words, and they did not sound like the cries of other children.

The child could not hear. He could not speak. He had been born deaf and mute. That was why the guns had not awakened him, why he had not heard the battle, and why his grief now came out in broken, terrible sounds.

Then he became still. His lips shook, but he did not move away. The fire burned behind him, the wounded men lay by the stream, and the night closed around the ruined home. The child stood there, looking down at what war had left him.

A Horseman in the Sky

Part 1 — The Sleeping Sentinel

One sunny afternoon in the autumn of 1861, a soldier lay in a thick group of laurel bushes beside a road in western Virginia. He lay flat on his stomach, with his feet behind him and his head resting on one arm. His right hand held his rifle loosely. If not for the slow movement of his breathing, he might have looked dead.

But he was not dead. He was asleep. This was a very serious crime for a soldier on guard duty. If an officer found him sleeping at his post, the law of the army could sentence him to death.

The place where he slept was dangerous and important. The road climbed steeply up the mountain and then turned sharply near the laurel bushes. After that, it ran for a short distance along the top of the ridge. Then it turned again and went down through the forest on the other side.

Near the second turn, a large flat rock reached out over the valley. It stood at the top of a high cliff. If a stone fell from that rock, it would drop a thousand feet before it touched the tops of the pine trees far below. A man standing there would feel the whole depth of the air under him.

The sleeping soldier was posted where he could see that rock and the road near it. If he had been awake, he could also have seen the side of the cliff and the deep valley below. His duty was to watch carefully. Nothing that moved on the road or near the cliff should have escaped his eyes.

The country around him was wild. Forest covered almost everything. Far down in the valley, there was a small open meadow with a stream running through it. From above, the meadow looked no larger than a garden, but it was really much bigger.

Beyond that meadow rose another line of cliffs. They stood high and blue in the distance. The valley seemed closed in by rock and forest. It was hard to understand how the road had found a way into it, or how the little stream found a way out.

Yet even such a wild place had become part of the war. Hidden in the forest at the bottom of the valley lay five regiments of Federal soldiers. They had marched through the day and the night before. Now they were resting in silence under the trees.

Their plan was dangerous. At night, they would rise and move again. They would climb the road to the ridge, pass the place where the sleeping soldier now lay, and go down the other side of the mountain. Then they would attack an enemy camp from behind.

If the plan worked, the enemy would be surprised. If it failed, the Federal soldiers would be in great danger. The road and the valley were like a trap. A small force holding the right places could stop a much larger army there.

Because of this, the sleeping guard's duty was not a small matter. If an enemy scout came and saw the hidden troops, the whole plan might be ruined. The enemy camp would be warned. Many men could die because one tired soldier had closed his eyes.

The afternoon was quiet and warm. The light lay softly on the leaves. No wind moved through the laurel bushes. The silence of the mountain seemed deep enough to hold even the sounds of war far away.

The soldier slept on. His body was tired from hard marching and watch duty. His mind had let go of danger for a little while. The rifle in his hand was useless while his eyes were shut.

Below him, the hidden army waited for night. Above him, the sky was clear. Around him, the forest stood still, as if it too were waiting. The whole success of the movement depended on secrecy, silence, and one man's open eyes.

But the man's eyes were closed. He did not see the road. He did not see the high rock. He did not see the deep valley, the meadow, or the line of cliffs beyond it.

In that quiet place, the sleeping soldier looked peaceful. But his peace was false. War was very near, though no gun had fired. The danger was already there, hidden in the sunlight, in the road, and in the valley below.

Part 2 — Carter and His Father

The sleeping soldier was named Carter Druse. He was a young man from Virginia, and his home was only a few miles from the place where he now lay. He was the only child of rich parents. He had grown up with comfort, education, and the quiet pride of an old family.

His father was a strong and serious man. He loved Virginia deeply and believed that his son should love it in the same way. But when the war came, Carter's mind went another way. He believed that his duty was to the Union.

One morning, Carter rose from the breakfast table and spoke to his father. His voice was quiet, but his words were firm. "Father," he said, "a Union regiment has come to Grafton. I am going to join it."

His father lifted his head and looked at him for a long moment. The old man's face did not change much, but there was pain in his eyes. At last he spoke in a hard, controlled voice.

"Go, then," he said. "Whatever happens, do what you believe is your duty. Virginia must live without you, though you have turned against her. If we both live until the war is over, we may speak of this again."

Carter did not answer at once. He stood before his father with deep respect, but he did not take back his words. The room seemed colder than before. The life he had known since childhood was already moving away from him.

Then his father spoke again, more quietly. Carter's mother was very ill. The doctor had said that she might live only a few more weeks. "Do not trouble her with this," his father said. "Her time is short, and every peaceful hour is precious."

Carter bowed to his father. His father returned the bow with the grave courtesy of a gentleman. Both men were proud, and both were suffering. Neither showed fully what was happening inside his heart.

Carter left the home of his childhood and became a soldier. He did not leave because he hated his family. He left because he believed that a man must follow his conscience, even when that choice cuts deeply. From that day, his duty and his blood stood on opposite sides of the war.

In the army, he proved himself brave and steady. He did dangerous work without complaint. His officers came to trust him. His knowledge of the local mountains also made him useful, because few soldiers knew the roads and valleys as well as he did.

That was why he had been placed at this lonely post on the ridge. He was far forward, away from the main body of the Federal force. It was a place for a man with sharp eyes and strong nerves. He had both, but he also had a tired body.

Tiredness had defeated him. He had closed his eyes for only a little rest, or perhaps without meaning to rest at all. But sleep had taken him fully. In war, such a small failure can become a crime.

Then something woke him. No sound came clearly to his ears. No hand touched his shoulder. Yet some hidden warning seemed to pass through him and open his mind.

Carter did not jump or cry out. He raised his head slowly from his arm. His right hand closed more firmly around his rifle. Through the stems and leaves of the laurel bushes, he looked toward the road and the great rock beyond it.

At first, what he saw did not seem like a danger. It seemed like a work of art. On the high rock at the edge of the cliff stood a horse and rider, clear against the sky. They were so still that they looked like a statue.

The horse stood near the very edge. The rider sat straight and calm in the saddle. His body had the firm shape of a trained soldier. The horse, too, seemed proud and silent, as if it had been carved from stone.

The gray clothing of the rider matched the sky behind him. The metal on his equipment did not shine brightly. It was softened by shadow. The whole figure seemed larger than life because it stood so high above the valley.

For one strange moment, Carter felt as if he had slept for years. It seemed to him that the war was over and that he was looking at a statue built to remember brave men. His own part in the war felt far away, small, and almost unreal.

Then the horse moved. It did not step forward, but its body drew back a little from the edge of the rock. The rider remained almost perfectly still. That small movement was enough to break the dream.

Carter was fully awake now. The horseman was not a statue. He was a living enemy on the high rock above the valley. He was looking down, perhaps toward the hidden Federal troops far below.

Carter did not yet move his rifle into position. He watched through the leaves, holding his breath. The man on the horse stood in the open sky, silent and dangerous. In that moment, Carter understood that his lonely watch had truly begun.

Part 3 — The Shot

Carter watched the horseman through the laurel leaves. The man had not seen him, or at least did not seem to have seen him. He sat quietly on the horse, looking down into the valley. Below that cliff, hidden by trees, were thousands of Federal soldiers.

If the horseman saw them, he could ride back and warn his own army. Then the surprise attack planned for that night would fail. The men sleeping below might be attacked before they were ready. Carter understood all this in a single cold thought.

He pushed the barrel of his rifle slowly through the bushes. He moved with great care, so that no leaf would shake more than necessary. Then he raised the rifle to his shoulder and looked along it. The horseman’s breast was in his sight.

One touch of Carter’s finger would end the danger. One shot would send the man down before he could carry news to the enemy. It was a soldier’s work, and in war such work is often plain. Yet Carter’s finger did not move.

At that moment, the horseman turned his head. He looked toward the laurel bushes. To Carter, it seemed that the man was looking straight into his hidden face. It seemed that those eyes saw him clearly through leaves, shadow, and distance.

Carter’s strength almost left him. His face became pale, and his body shook. The rifle dropped a little from its place. The horseman and the horse seemed to rise and fall before his eyes, as if the whole sky had begun to move.

Carter lowered his head until his face touched the leaves beneath him. He was

a brave soldier, but for a short time feeling was stronger than courage. His heart beat hard, and his mind was full of pain. He could not shoot.

But the weakness did not last. Slowly, he lifted his face again. His hands found their places on the rifle. His eyes became clear, and his breathing grew calm.

He knew that he could not capture the horseman. The man was too far away and too near the edge of escape. If Carter called out, the horseman would turn and ride back at once. If he waited too long, the secret in the valley might be lost.

Still, Carter tried to find another hope. Perhaps the man had seen nothing. Perhaps he was only looking down because the valley was beautiful. Perhaps he would soon turn away and ride back without understanding the danger.

Carter turned his own eyes downward into the deep valley. Far below, in the small green meadow, he saw a line of men and horses. Some soldiers had brought their horses to the stream to drink. They were moving in the open, where they could be seen from above.

This was the truth Carter had feared. The horseman on the rock could see them. He could see enough to understand that Federal troops were hidden in the valley. If he carried that news away, many lives might be lost.

Carter looked again at the horseman. The figure was still there, sharp against the sky. The horse stood near the edge of the cliff. The rider remained quiet, but his quietness was now more dangerous than movement.

Carter thought of his father's last command to him. "Whatever happens, do what you believe is your duty." Those words came back to him with terrible force. They were not gentle words now. They were like an order spoken across time.

His duty became clear. It did not become easy, but it became clear. He must stop the horseman. He must protect the army below him.

Carter changed his aim. He no longer pointed the rifle at the man's breast. Instead, he aimed at the horse. If the horse fell, the rider could not carry the news away.

His body grew very still. His teeth closed firmly, but not with fear. His hands no longer shook. Even his breathing became slow and even.

The forest, the road, the cliff, the valley, and the hidden army all seemed to

hold their breath with him. Carter's eye stayed on the sight of the rifle. The horse stood against the sky, proud and silent.

Carter's finger touched the trigger. For one last instant, nothing moved. Then he fired.

Part 4 — The Falling Horseman

Far below the cliff, a Federal officer had left the hidden camp in the valley. He had walked out alone, partly from curiosity and partly to learn more about the ground. He came to a small open place near the foot of the great wall of rock. From there, he looked up at the cliff above him.

The rock rose straight into the sky. It was so high that the officer felt dizzy when he tried to follow it with his eyes. The edge of the cliff cut a hard line against the blue air. Trees stood at its foot, but from below they seemed small and weak beside that great height.

Then the officer saw something that made him stop breathing. A man on a horse was coming down from the top of the cliff. He was not falling like a stone, or so it seemed at first. He looked as if he were riding through the air.

The rider sat straight in the saddle. His body was firm, and his hands seemed to hold the reins. His long hair rose above his head as he fell. The horse's legs moved wildly, almost as if it were still running on solid ground.

For a few seconds, the officer could not understand what he was seeing. The sight was too strange. It seemed like a vision, not like a real event in the world. A horseman in the sky was riding down through empty air.

Fear and wonder overcame the officer. His legs failed him, and he fell to the ground. Almost at the same moment, he heard a great crash among the trees at the foot of the cliff. Then all was still again.

The officer rose slowly. His body was shaking. A scratch on his leg helped bring him back to himself, because pain is an ordinary thing, and ordinary things can pull the mind out of terror. He tried to think like a soldier again.

He ran away from the cliff at an angle, looking for the horseman. He expected

to find the rider some distance from the rock, because the fall had looked like a long flight. But he found nothing there. He had not yet understood that what falls from a cliff comes almost straight down.

After a while, he returned to the hidden camp. He said nothing about what he had seen. He knew that a strange truth can sound like a lie. A wise man is sometimes silent because other people are not ready to believe him.

When his commander asked whether he had learned anything useful, the officer gave a simple answer. “Yes, sir,” he said. “There is no road leading down into this valley from the south.” The commander smiled, because he believed there was such a road.

Up on the ridge, Carter Druse reloaded his rifle. Then he returned to his place among the laurel bushes. His face was white, but his body was steady. He lay there again and watched the road as a soldier must.

About ten minutes later, a Federal sergeant came toward him. The sergeant moved carefully on his hands and knees so that he would not be seen from the road. Carter did not turn his head when the man came near. He kept his eyes forward.

“Did you fire?” the sergeant whispered.

“Yes,” Carter answered.

“At what?” the sergeant asked.

Carter’s voice was low and even. “At a horse,” he said. “It was standing on that rock, far out near the edge. You can see that it is no longer there. It went over the cliff.”

The sergeant looked toward the rock. He did not fully understand. Something in Carter’s face troubled him, but Carter gave no further sign of feeling. He had spoken as if he were reporting a small fact of duty.

After a moment, the sergeant spoke again. “Druse, do not hide anything from me. I order you to tell me the full truth. Was there anyone on the horse?”

Carter was silent for a short time. He still did not look at the sergeant. His eyes stayed on the road, as if another enemy might appear at any moment.

“Yes,” he said at last.

The sergeant waited. The mountain seemed quiet around them. The army in the valley still did not know what had happened above it.

“Who was it?” the sergeant asked.

Carter answered without turning his head. “My father.”

The sergeant rose to his feet. For once, he forgot the danger of being seen. He walked away slowly, as if the ground had become strange under him.

Carter remained where he was. He held his rifle and watched the road. The shot had been fired, the danger had passed, and duty had been done. But the man who had done it would carry that moment inside him for the rest of his life.

The Damned Thing

Part 1 — The Inquest

A small cabin stood in the dark wilderness. Inside it, one candle burned on the end of a rough table. Its light was weak and yellow. It showed some things clearly and left other things in shadow.

A man sat near the candle, reading from an old account book. The book was worn, and the writing was hard to see. Sometimes he held the page close to the flame so that he could read the words. When he did this, the book threw a large shadow across the room.

There were other men in the cabin. Seven of them sat against the log walls, silent and still. Their faces were rough, like the faces of farmers and woodmen. They looked like men who knew hard work, lonely places, and little comfort.

An eighth man lay on the table. He was partly covered with a sheet. His arms lay straight at his sides, and his face was turned upward. He was Hugh Morgan, and he was dead.

No one spoke. The man with the book did not read aloud. The others seemed to be waiting for something, though they did not say what. Only the dead man waited for nothing.

Outside the cabin, night filled the forest. Through the open window came the sounds of the wild country. A coyote cried somewhere far away. Insects called from the trees, and night birds made strange short sounds in the dark.

The men in the room did not seem to notice these sounds. They were not men who spent time thinking about mystery or beauty. They had come for a serious matter. Their eyes often moved toward the body on the table.

The man reading the book was different from the others. His clothes were not fine, but they did not belong fully to the mountain country either. He had the look of a man who had lived in towns and had seen more of the world. He was the coroner.

Because of his office, the book was in his hands. It had been found among

Hugh Morgan's things in the cabin. Now the coroner read it quietly, as if the dead man might still be speaking through the pages.

At last, the coroner closed the book and put it into his coat. Just then, the door opened, and a young man came in. He was dressed like someone from a city. His clothes were dusty, and it was clear that he had ridden hard to reach the place.

The coroner looked at him and gave a small nod. No one else greeted him. The men along the wall only watched. The young man stood near the door, breathing a little heavily from his ride.

"We have waited for you," the coroner said. "This matter must be finished tonight."

The young man smiled, but there was tension in his face. He said he was sorry to be late. He had gone away, not to avoid the law, but to send a report to his newspaper. He had written about what he was now called to tell.

The coroner's smile was thin. He said that the report sent to the newspaper was probably not the same as the words the young man would speak under oath. The young man's face became red. He did not like the coroner's tone.

He said he had kept a copy of what he had written. He had not sent it as ordinary news, because the facts seemed impossible to believe. He had sent it as fiction. Still, he said, it was true, and he was ready to swear to it.

The coroner did not argue at once. He looked down at the floor for a few moments. Around the room, the seated men whispered softly to one another. Even while whispering, they kept looking toward the covered body.

Then the coroner raised his head. "We will continue the inquest," he said.

The men removed their hats. The young man was sworn as a witness. The candle burned low and steady, and the dead man lay between them all like a silent question.

The coroner began with simple questions. The witness gave his name as William Harker. He was twenty-seven years old. He had known Hugh Morgan and had been near him when he died.

The coroner asked why Harker had been there. Harker said he had been visiting Morgan to hunt and fish. But that was not his only reason. He had also

wanted to study Morgan, because Morgan lived alone in a strange way and might be useful as a character in a story.

“I sometimes write stories,” Harker said.

“I sometimes read them,” the coroner answered.

Harker thanked him, but the coroner added that he meant stories in general, not Harker’s stories. Some of the men laughed quietly. The laugh sounded strange in that room, with the dead body so near.

Then the coroner told Harker to describe the death of Hugh Morgan. He said Harker could use any notes he wished. Harker understood. He took a written paper from inside his coat.

He moved closer to the candle and turned the pages until he found the place he wanted. His hand was steady, but his face was serious. The men along the walls leaned forward a little.

Hugh Morgan lay still under the sheet. The candle touched the edge of his covered body with weak light. Outside, the wilderness continued its night sounds, but inside the cabin everyone waited for Harker’s words.

At last, William Harker began to read.

Part 2 — The Field of Wild Oats

Harker read from his paper in the quiet cabin. He said that he and Hugh Morgan had left the house just after sunrise. They were going to hunt quail, and each man carried a shotgun. They had only one dog with them.

Morgan knew the country well. He said the best place for birds was beyond a certain ridge. He led the way through thick bushes and small trees. Harker followed a few steps behind him.

When they crossed the ridge, they came out into more level ground. Wild oats covered the field. The dry stalks stood thick and high, moving softly in the morning air. Beyond them were more bushes and trees.

Morgan was walking a few yards in front of Harker. Suddenly, they heard a noise off to the right and a little ahead. Something was moving violently in the

bushes. The branches shook as if a large animal were fighting its way through them.

Harker thought they had frightened a deer. He said he wished they had brought a rifle. A shotgun was good for birds, but it was not the best weapon for a large animal. His voice was still easy and natural.

Morgan did not answer. He had stopped and was staring at the moving bushes. He raised his gun and made it ready to fire. Harker was surprised, because Morgan was known as a very cool man, even in danger.

Harker tried to laugh the matter away. “You are not going to shoot a deer with bird shot, are you?” he said. But Morgan still did not answer. His face had become very pale.

Then Harker understood that Morgan believed the danger was serious. His own first thought was that the animal might be a bear. He stepped closer to Morgan and made his own gun ready. The bushes had stopped moving, but Morgan still watched them with fixed eyes.

“What is it?” Harker asked. “What is it?”

Morgan did not turn his head. His voice sounded dry and strange. “That Damned Thing,” he said.

Harker did not understand. He was about to ask another question when he saw the wild oats move near the place where the bushes had shaken. The movement was not like the movement of ordinary wind. It was too straight, too heavy, and too clear.

A line of oats bent down and stayed down. Something seemed to press them flat as it moved forward. The crushed line came slowly toward the two men. Yet Harker could see nothing above it.

He later said that he did not remember feeling simple fear at first. What he felt was stranger than fear. The world seemed to have broken one of its own rules. Grass was being pushed down by something that had no visible body.

Harker watched the moving line come nearer. It did not turn away. It came directly toward them. The field before him seemed normal in every other way, and that made the sight worse.

Morgan was openly frightened now. His body shook. Suddenly he raised his shotgun to his shoulder and fired both barrels into the moving oats. The smoke burst out in front of him and hid the field for a moment.

Before the smoke cleared, Harker heard a wild cry. It was not a human cry, or at least it did not sound like one. It was sharp, angry, and terrible, like the scream of some hurt animal.

Morgan threw his gun to the ground and ran. At the same instant, something struck Harker hard. He could see nothing, but a heavy, soft force hit him through the smoke and threw him down.

His gun flew from his hands. For a few seconds he could not rise. The earth seemed to jump under him, and the air was full of the smell of powder and dry grass. Then he heard Morgan cry out.

Morgan's cries were full of pain. Mixed with them were deep, rough sounds that Harker could not name. They were like the sounds of fighting animals, but worse, because no animal could be seen.

Harker struggled to his feet and looked toward Morgan. What he saw made him wish he had never opened his eyes. Less than thirty yards away, Morgan was down on one knee. His head was thrown back, and his long hair was wild.

Morgan's body moved violently from side to side. He bent backward, then forward, as if he were fighting with a powerful enemy. One arm was lifted, but Harker could not clearly see the hand. The other arm seemed to disappear.

At moments, Harker could see only part of Morgan's body. It was as if something were standing between them, hiding him in pieces. Then Morgan moved, and all of him was visible again. This made the sight more terrible, not less.

The whole struggle lasted only a short time. But to Harker, it seemed long enough to fill his mind forever. Morgan shouted and cursed, while the unseen thing made sounds of rage around him. Harker could see his friend, but not the power that was killing him.

For one moment Harker stood still, unable to move. Then he threw down his own gun and ran toward Morgan. He still did not fully understand what he had

seen. Part of his mind tried to believe that Morgan was having some kind of fit.

Before Harker reached him, Morgan fell flat and became quiet. At once, all the terrible sounds stopped. The sudden silence was almost as frightening as the noise had been.

Then Harker saw the wild oats move again. The same unseen weight was passing away from Morgan's body. A line of grass bent and stayed crushed as it moved toward the edge of the woods.

Harker could not take his eyes from it. The invisible thing moved steadily until it reached the trees. Only then did he turn back to his friend.

Hugh Morgan lay still on the ground. His struggle was over. He was dead.

Part 3 — The Body and the Verdict

Harker finished reading and lowered his paper. The cabin was quiet again. The candle still burned on the rough table, and Hugh Morgan still lay under the sheet. The men along the walls looked at Harker, then at the body, and then at the coroner.

The coroner rose from his chair. He went to the table and stood beside the dead man. Without speaking, he took hold of the sheet and pulled it back. Hugh Morgan's whole body was now open to the candlelight.

The sight was terrible. Morgan's skin had a yellow, clay-like color. Across his chest, sides, and arms were dark marks, almost black in places. They looked like the marks left by heavy blows.

His body had not simply been scratched. The skin was torn in long strips and broken places. Some wounds were deep, and some were wide. It was hard to believe that one ordinary animal could have done such work.

The coroner walked to the head of the table. A silk cloth had been tied under Morgan's chin and over the top of his head. The coroner untied it and took it away. Then the men saw what had happened to Morgan's throat.

Several of the jurors had stood up to look more closely. At once they wished they had not done so. Some turned their faces away. Harker went quickly to the window, leaned out, and looked into the dark as if he needed air.

The coroner covered the throat again. Then he went to a corner of the room where Morgan's clothes lay in a pile. One by one, he picked them up and held them near the candle. Each piece was torn and stiff with blood.

The jurors did not ask to examine the clothes closely. They had already seen the body before Harker came. To them, the body and the clothes were not new. The only new thing that night was Harker's strange story.

The coroner turned to the men. He said there was no more evidence. Their duty had already been explained to them. If they had no questions, they could go outside and decide what had caused Hugh Morgan's death.

The foreman of the jury stood up. He was a tall, rough-looking man with a gray beard. He did not look at Harker with respect. He looked at him as if Harker were the strangest thing in the room.

"I have one question," the foreman said to the coroner. "What kind of hospital for mad people did this witness run away from?"

The coroner did not smile. He turned to Harker with a serious face. "Mr. Harker," he said, "from what hospital for mad people did you last escape?"

Harker's face became red. He was angry and ashamed, but he said nothing. The seven jurors rose and went out of the cabin in a slow line. Their heavy boots sounded on the floor, and then the door closed behind them.

Harker and the coroner were left alone with the dead man. The candle flame moved a little in the quiet air. Harker stood very straight, trying to keep his anger under control.

"If you are finished insulting me," Harker said, "I suppose I may go."

"Yes," the coroner said.

Harker walked to the door, but then he stopped with his hand on the latch. He was a newspaper man, and habit was stronger than pride. He turned back toward the coroner.

"That book you have," he said. "I know it. It is Morgan's diary. You seemed very interested in it while I was speaking. May I see it? The public would want to know—"

The coroner slipped the book into his coat pocket. He said the book would not

matter in this inquiry. All its entries had been written before Morgan died. To him, that seemed to settle the question.

Harker looked at him for a moment. Then he opened the door and left the cabin. The night outside took him at once, and the sounds of the wilderness came in more clearly for a second before the door closed.

As Harker went out, the jurors came back in. They stood around the table again. The body was covered now, but its shape was still sharp under the sheet. The dead face made a clear outline through the cloth.

The foreman sat near the candle. He took a pencil and a small piece of paper from his pocket. He wrote slowly, with effort, while the other jurors waited.

The verdict was simple and awkward. The jury said that Hugh Morgan had been killed by a mountain lion. Then they added, in their own way, that some of them still thought he had suffered a fit.

The men signed the paper. The law had its answer. But the body on the table, the torn clothes, Harker's story, and Morgan's hidden diary all pointed toward something that the law had not named.

Part 4 — The Diary

The coroner had kept Hugh Morgan's diary. It did not seem useful to the jury, because it had not been written after Morgan's death. But to a careful reader, the book gave another kind of testimony. It did not explain everything, but it showed what Morgan had feared before the end.

One entry told of a night when Morgan had been looking at the stars. The sky was clear, and the stars shone brightly. Then, in one small part of the sky, some stars suddenly disappeared. They were hidden, but there was no cloud there.

Morgan watched closely. After a moment, the stars came back. Then other stars near them disappeared in the same way. It was as if something dark and solid were moving through the air between him and the sky.

Yet he could see no shape. He could see only what the thing covered as it passed. This troubled him deeply. He had the feeling that something was there,

but his eyes could not reach it.

Another entry told of his dog. The dog had been brave and faithful, and Morgan knew its ways well. One day it suddenly stopped, raised its head, and stared at an empty place. Then it began to tremble.

Morgan saw nothing in the place where the dog was looking. But the dog growled, stepped back, and would not move forward. Its fear was real. It was not the fear of a shadow or a sound that Morgan could understand.

Soon after that, the dog ran away from something that Morgan could not see. It returned later, badly hurt and almost wild with terror. From that time, Morgan believed that some living thing was near his cabin and that the dog had seen or sensed it better than a man could.

There were also signs on the ground. Morgan found grass pressed down in strange lines. He found bushes broken as if a heavy body had passed through them. Sometimes the marks ended suddenly, or began again in places where no visible animal had walked.

He tried to think like a practical man. He considered bears, wild cats, and other animals. But none of these explanations satisfied him. The marks were too strange, and the fear they caused in his dog was too great.

In the diary, Morgan did not sound like a man telling ghost stories. He sounded like a man trying to understand a fact. He knew that people might laugh at him. Still, he wrote down each sign carefully because he wanted some record of what he had seen.

Then he began to think about sight itself. Human eyes, he wrote, do not see everything. There are sounds that human ears cannot hear, though animals may hear them. In the same way, perhaps there are colors that human eyes cannot see.

A thing might have such a color. If it did, it might stand in full daylight and still be invisible to human beings. A dog or another animal might sense it. Grass might bend under it, and bushes might break before it, while a man saw only empty air.

This thought did not comfort Morgan. It made his fear worse. If the thing was real and invisible, then he could not fight it in the ordinary way. He could not

watch its eyes, judge its movement, or know when it was close enough to strike.

The diary showed that Morgan had lived for some time with this fear. He had heard things near the cabin. He had seen the strange movement of grass. He had felt that something unknown was watching or following him.

At times he doubted himself. At other times he was almost certain. He did not want to believe in a monster, but the signs kept coming. Each sign seemed small by itself, but together they formed a dark pattern.

The last ideas in the diary were the most important. Morgan wrote that the unknown creature might be invisible only because of the limits of the human eye. It might not be a spirit. It might be a living animal, made of matter like any other animal, but colored in a way that people could not see.

If that was true, then Harker's story was not madness. The moving oats, the unseen blow, the hidden body in the struggle, and the terrible wounds all belonged to one explanation. Something had attacked Hugh Morgan in the field.

The jury had called it a mountain lion because a mountain lion was something they could name. The coroner had heard Harker's story and had read the diary, but even he could not bring such a truth into the language of the law. The law needed a visible killer.

The diary offered no final answer. It gave only fear, signs, and a thought that opened a darker door. Hugh Morgan had lived near something that he could not see. In the end, that unseen thing came through the wild oats and killed him.

The Death of Halpin Frayser

Part 1 — The Name in the Forest

One dark summer night, a man woke suddenly in a forest. He lifted his head from the ground and stared into the blackness around him. For a few seconds, he did not know where he was. Then he spoke one name aloud.

“Catherine Larue,” he said.

He said nothing more. He did not know why he had said the name. It had not been in his thoughts before he woke. It seemed to come from somewhere deeper than memory.

The man was Halpin Frayser. He had been hunting that day in the hills west of the Napa Valley. He had gone out to shoot doves and other small birds, but late in the afternoon the sky had become cloudy. Then he had lost his way.

If he had found a clear path, he could have gone downhill and reached safety. But the hills were covered with thick bushes and trees. The darkness came before he could find his way out. At last he was too tired to continue.

He lay down near the root of a large tree. Dry leaves were under him, damp earth was beneath the leaves, and the open sky was above the branches. It was not a safe or comfortable bed, but tiredness was stronger than fear. He fell into a deep sleep.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, he woke and spoke that strange name. The forest around him was very dark. He could see almost nothing. The air was still, and the trees seemed to stand close around him.

Halpin was not a man who studied such things deeply. He did not ask himself why a sleeping man might wake and speak a name he did not understand. He thought it was odd, and a small cold feeling passed through him. But he did not try to solve the mystery.

After a little while, he lay down again. His body was still tired. The ground was hard, but sleep came back to him. This time, however, his sleep was not empty.

He dreamed that he was walking on a dusty road. The road looked pale in the

gathering darkness of a summer evening. He did not know where it began or where it would end. He only knew that he had to walk on it.

Everything in the dream seemed natural to him. He did not wonder why he was there. Dreams often have their own strange law. While we dream, even impossible things can feel simple and ordinary.

After some time, he came to a place where the road divided. The main road went forward, but another road turned away from it. This second road looked old and little used. Grass and weeds had begun to take it back.

Halpin felt that the side road led to something evil. He could not explain how he knew this. The feeling came to him with great force. Yet he turned into that road without stopping.

He felt as if some strong command were pushing him forward. He did not choose freely. His feet went on because they had to go on. The old road led deeper into the forest.

As he walked, he became aware of hidden things around him. He could not see them. They were among the trees on both sides of the road. They whispered in broken voices, close and far away at the same time.

The words were in a language he did not know. Still, he partly understood their meaning. They seemed to speak of a dark plan against him. They hated him, or so he felt, and they were waiting for something.

Night had now fully fallen in the dream. Yet the forest was not completely dark. A weak, strange light filled it. The light seemed to come from nowhere, and nothing cast a shadow.

Then Halpin saw a shallow pool in an old rut in the road. It shone with a dark red light. He bent down and put his hand into it. When he lifted his fingers, they were stained.

It was blood.

After that, he saw blood everywhere. It lay in spots on the broad leaves of weeds beside the road. It marked the dust between the wheel tracks. It stained the trunks of trees and seemed to drip from their leaves.

Terror rose inside him. But mixed with the terror was another feeling.

Somehow, this bloody road seemed expected, as if it had been prepared for him. He felt that it had something to do with a crime.

He believed he was guilty of something. He did not know what the crime was. He searched his memory, trying to find the moment when he had done it. But no clear answer came.

Pictures from his life rushed into his mind. One memory covered another. Faces, places, voices, and old scenes appeared and disappeared in confusion. He looked for the one thing that would explain his fear, but he could not find it.

This made the dream worse. It was terrible to feel guilty and not know why. It was like being punished for a murder committed in the dark, without knowing the victim or the reason.

The strange light, the bloody road, the whispering trees, and the unseen beings pressed on him from every side. He could bear it no longer. With a great effort, he opened his mouth and shouted with all his strength.

His voice did not sound like one human voice. It broke apart and seemed to run away through the forest in many strange sounds. Then it died in the distance. The forest became as silent and terrible as before.

Still, the shout had helped him a little. He felt that he had made a beginning. He was no longer only a frightened thing moving along the road. He wanted to speak, to leave a message, and to ask for help from any power that was not evil.

Part 2 — The Dead Face

Halpin stood in the strange road and tried to master his fear. The unseen voices still moved among the trees, but he no longer wanted only to run or cry out. He felt that he must leave some record of what was happening to him. If good powers passed along that terrible road, perhaps they might find his words and help him.

He spoke aloud in the dream, though no friendly person was near him. He said that he would not suffer in silence. He would tell what had happened to him and how he had been hunted by the dark things in the forest. He called himself helpless and innocent, though somewhere inside him the feeling of guilt still burned.

He searched his clothes and found a small pocketbook. It was made of red leather, and part of it had blank pages for notes. In ordinary life, such a little book would have been a common object. In the dream, it seemed like his only hope.

He opened it quickly and looked for a pencil. There was none. For a moment, despair almost took him again. Then his eyes fell on the blood in the road, and he knew what he must use.

He broke a small twig from a bush beside him. The branch snapped softly in his hand. He bent down, dipped the end of the twig into one of the red pools, and raised it over the page. The blood hung at the point like dark ink.

He began to write as fast as he could. The words came quickly because fear drove them forward. He wanted to explain everything, but he did not know what everything was. He could only write of the road, the blood, the whispers, and the terrible wrong being done to him.

As soon as the twig touched the paper, a laugh sounded far away. It was low at first, but it grew louder. It came nearer and nearer through the forest, though Halpin could not see who made it. The laugh had no joy in it.

It was a cold, empty laugh. It sounded like something alive only in hate. It rose until it seemed to break open right beside him. Then it passed away again, softer and softer, as if the thing that laughed had gone to the edge of the world.

But Halpin knew it had not gone. He felt that it was still near him. The knowledge did not come through his eyes or ears. It came as a deep certainty in his mind, a certainty stronger than sight.

A new fear entered him. The hidden beings among the trees were terrible, but this presence was worse. It was greater than they were, and more powerful. It seemed to rule the road, the blood, the whispers, and the dream itself.

Halpin could not tell from which direction it approached. It was before him, behind him, above him, and inside the darkness all at once. He did not dare turn his head. He felt that if he looked the wrong way, the thing might be there.

Still he wrote. His hand moved with desperate speed. The twig did not need to be dipped again, because blood seemed to flow from it as if the twig itself were alive. Red words spread across the page under his shaking hand.

His one thought was to finish the message. If he could finish it, perhaps some good power would read it. Perhaps someone would know that he had suffered unjustly. Perhaps he would not be left forever in that hateful forest.

Then his hand stopped. He had not chosen to stop. His fingers still wanted to move, but they would not obey him. His arms grew heavy and dropped to his sides.

The pocketbook fell from his hand and landed on the ground. He tried to bend and take it up again, but his body would not move. He tried to cry out, but no sound came. He was standing like a man turned to stone.

Slowly, he became aware that something was in front of him. He did not see it arrive. It was simply there, close enough for him to touch if his arms had been able to move. The strange light of the forest showed its shape.

It was a woman. She stood white and silent in the road. Her clothes were the clothes of the grave, and her face was sharply drawn, as if life had long ago left it. Her eyes were open, but no living thought looked out from them.

Halpin knew that face. It was the face of his mother. Yet the thing before him was not his mother as he had loved her. It had her features, but not her tenderness, not her warmth, and not her soul.

No love rose in him when he saw her. No sweet memory came to comfort him. The sight did not bring back home, childhood, or kindness. It brought only a fear so great that all other feelings disappeared.

He wanted to turn and run. His legs would not move. He wanted to lift his hands and hide his eyes. His arms hung uselessly at his sides.

Only his eyes still obeyed him. They stayed fixed on the dead face before him. He could not look away from those empty eyes. They held him as strongly as hands.

The figure did not speak. It did not call him by name. It did not show pity, anger, or sorrow in any human way. Its silence was worse than words.

Halpin understood, with the terrible logic of dreams, that this was not a spirit without a body. It was a body without a soul. It had the shape of the person he had loved most, but none of the love that had once lived in that shape.

The forest around him seemed to vanish from his mind. He no longer thought

of the bloody road, the whispers, or the message in the pocketbook. There was only the dead face before him, white in the strange light.

For a long moment, nothing happened. The figure stood close to him and stared. Halpin felt that the whole world had grown old and evil while he waited.

Then the woman's hands moved. They came forward slowly at first, with the pale fingers spread. A moment later, the dead thing sprang at him with sudden force, and the empty eyes came closer to his own.

Part 3 — Halpin and Katy

When Halpin Frayser was young, he lived with his parents in Nashville, Tennessee. His family had money and a good name. The Civil War had damaged the life they had once known, but the Fraysers still belonged to the better part of local society. Halpin grew up with books, manners, and comfort.

He was the youngest child and was not very strong. Because of this, his mother cared for him with special tenderness. His father, however, gave much of his time to politics. Like many men of his class and place, he was always busy with public matters and often had little attention left for home.

Halpin was quiet, dreamy, and romantic. He was more interested in stories and poetry than in practical life. His family wanted him to study law and become useful in the ordinary way. But he did not seem made for that kind of life.

Some people in the family said that he had inherited the spirit of an old relative named Myron Bayne. Bayne had been a poet long ago and was remembered with pride, though perhaps not with much honest reading. The family owned copies of his poems, but they did not really want Halpin to become another poet. A dead poet in the family was respectable; a living one was more troublesome.

In truth, Halpin was not known to write poetry at all. Still, his dreamy ways made people worry that he might begin at any time. His family was practical in its own proud way. They respected public position, duty, and influence much more than private dreams.

Halpin's mother understood him better than anyone else did. She was beautiful,

sensitive, and also a little romantic. Secretly, she admired the old family poet too. This shared weakness brought her and Halpin closer together.

From childhood, Halpin had called his mother Katy. As he grew into manhood, the name remained. Their love for each other became deeper year by year. They were often together, and strangers who saw them sometimes misunderstood their closeness.

There was nothing ordinary in their bond. They shared thoughts, feelings, and private fears. Halpin spoke to her with the free trust of a son who has never learned to hide his heart from his mother. Katy answered him with a tenderness that made their separation hard even to imagine.

One day Halpin entered his mother's private room. He kissed her forehead and touched a loose lock of her dark hair. He tried to speak calmly, but his voice showed that the matter was serious. "Katy," he said, "would it trouble you very much if I had to go to California for a few weeks?"

Katy did not need to answer at once. Her face answered for her. Color left her cheeks, and tears came into her brown eyes. She looked up at him with deep love and fear.

"My son," she said, "I knew something like this was coming. Last night I cried for hours because of a dream. In the dream, Grandfather Bayne stood by his picture on the wall. Then he pointed to your picture."

Halpin listened, though he did not fully understand. Katy went on. She said that when she looked at his picture in the dream, she could not see his face. It was covered like the face of a dead person.

Then she said something still more frightening. Under the cloth, she had seen marks on his throat. They looked like marks made by hands. She asked him to forgive her for speaking so directly, but they had never hidden such things from each other.

Halpin tried to keep his face calm. His mother believed that dreams could carry warnings. He was less sure. To him, the dream seemed terrible, but he did not think it necessarily meant what she feared.

Katy then tried to change the meaning of her own fear. She asked whether

there were healing springs in California. Perhaps, she said, she could go with him for her health. She held out her hands and said that her fingers felt stiff and painful.

Halpin looked at her hands. They looked soft and healthy, not sick at all. He smiled, but he understood what she was really asking. She did not want to be left behind.

In the end, however, they did separate. Halpin went to California because business required him to go. Katy stayed at home. Her husband had not strongly ordered her to stay, but his wishes and the habits of the house kept her there.

In San Francisco, Halpin's misfortunes began. One dark night, while he was walking near the water, he was seized and forced onto a ship. Men were sometimes taken in this way and made sailors against their will. Halpin suddenly found himself carried out to sea.

The ship did not bring him quickly back to his old life. It was wrecked on an island in the South Pacific. Halpin and a few others survived there for years. Six long years passed before a trading ship took the survivors away and brought them back to San Francisco.

By then, Halpin was poor. He had lost time, money, and the easy certainty of his youth. Yet he was still proud. He did not want help from strangers if he could avoid it.

He went to live for a while with another man who had survived the island with him. They stayed near the town of St. Helena while Halpin waited for news and money from home. His life was now far from Nashville, far from his father's house, and far from Katy's gentle room.

It was during that waiting time that he went out hunting in the hills west of the Napa Valley. He carried his gun and walked through the wild country, looking for small game. The day became cloudy, and he lost his way before night.

That was how he came to sleep alone in the forest. That was how he woke in the dark and spoke the name "Catherine Larue." And that was how the dream, the bloody road, and the dead face of his mother came to him under the trees.

Part 4 — The Attack

The dead woman stood before Halpin in the strange forest road. She looked like his mother, but she did not bring him any feeling of love. Her face was the face he knew, yet it was empty of all that had made it dear. The sight filled him with horror because it joined what he loved most with what he feared most.

He tried to move away from her. His mind ordered his feet to turn and run. But his legs felt heavy, as if they had become part of the earth. His arms hung helpless at his sides, and only his eyes still moved.

He could not look away from her dead eyes. They were open, but there was no thought in them. There was no kindness, no memory, and no sign that she knew him as her son. In that blank look, Halpin found no place to ask for mercy.

He understood, in the terrible way dreams make things clear, that this was not his mother's spirit. It was not a soul wearing the old body for a moment. It was the body alone, walking without the soul. That thought was worse than any ghost could have been.

The forest around him seemed to fall away from his mind. The bloody road, the red pools, the whispering things among the trees, and the small pocketbook on the ground all became distant. Only the dead face remained. It stood close to him, white and silent.

For what seemed a very long time, she did not move. She only stared. Halpin felt that time itself had stopped and that the world had grown old while he waited. He wanted anything to happen, even something terrible, because waiting under that look was more than he could bear.

Then the dead woman thrust her hands forward. The movement was sudden and fierce. A moment later, she sprang at him. Her pale fingers reached for his throat.

The attack broke the spell that held his body. His mind was still full of terror, but his muscles began to fight. He struck, twisted, and tried to push her away. For a few seconds, he felt almost as if he were watching another man struggle in his place.

Then his will returned fully. He knew that the body fighting was his own body.

He threw all his strength against the thing that held him. He was a strong man, and fear made him stronger.

But no living strength was enough against a creature made by his dream and his terror. The dead woman pressed closer. Her fingers were cold and hard. They found his throat and closed there.

Halpin pulled at her hands. He tried to tear them away. He bent backward and sideways, fighting for air. The dead face came nearer, until it was only a short distance from his own.

Her eyes still showed nothing. There was no anger in them, and that made them worse. A living enemy might hate, but hatred is at least a human thing. This face had no human feeling at all.

The fingers tightened around his throat. Pain shot through him. His mouth opened, but no clear cry came out. His breath was cut off, and the strange light of the forest began to shake before his eyes.

He was forced backward to the ground. Leaves and dust rose around him as he fell. Above him, the dead woman bent over his body. Her face filled the world.

Halpin tried once more to fight. His hands struck at her arms. His feet pushed against the earth. But each movement became weaker than the last.

Darkness began at the edge of his sight. It moved inward slowly at first, then faster. The white face above him seemed to float in the center of that darkness. The hands at his throat seemed to be the only real things left.

Then everything changed. He no longer felt the road under him. He no longer saw the forest clearly. He heard a far, low sound, like drums beating at a great distance.

Other sounds came with it. They were like many voices speaking together, but the words could not be understood. The voices rose and fell around him. Then one sharp cry cut through them all and made them silent.

In the silence that followed, Halpin felt that he had crossed some border. He was no longer only a man dreaming of death. He dreamed that he was dead.

Part 5 — The Graveyard in the Fog

A warm, clear night was followed by a morning of heavy fog. The fog had begun the day before as a small white cloud on the side of Mount St. Helena. At first it was so thin that it seemed ready to disappear. Then it grew larger and heavier, and slowly it came down into the valley.

By morning, the fog had covered the town of St. Helena and the road toward Calistoga. The trees were wet, and drops of water hung from every branch. Birds sat silent in their hiding places. The light had no warmth or color.

At the first gray light of dawn, two men left St. Helena and walked north along the road. Each carried a gun, but they were not hunters of birds or deer. One was Holker, a deputy sheriff from Napa. The other was Jaralson, a detective from San Francisco.

Their work that morning was to hunt a man. As they walked, their feet broke the damp top of the road and showed the dry white dust beneath it. The fog stood around them like a wall. They could see only a short distance ahead.

Holker asked how much farther they had to go. Jaralson said that the place was only half a mile away. People called it the White Church, though it was not white now and was not really a church. It was an old abandoned schoolhouse, with a graveyard near it.

Jaralson had asked Holker to come armed. Holker guessed that this meant danger. Jaralson then spoke of a man named Branscom, who had killed his wife and disappeared. There was a reward for his capture, but no one had been able to find him.

Jaralson said he had found where Branscom went. The man came at night to the old graveyard near the White Church. His wife had been buried there. Jaralson had watched the place, but Branscom had surprised him and forced him away at gunpoint.

Holker thought the man must be mad. A murderer who returned to his wife's grave seemed like a man driven by something stronger than common sense. Jaralson agreed that Branscom looked half wild, but he still wanted to catch him. There was money in it, and there was also pride.

They spoke as they walked, but their voices were not loud. The fog and the wet trees made the morning feel close and secret. Soon the road came near a forest of oaks, madroños, and tall spruces. Through the fog, the old schoolhouse appeared as a large gray shape.

When they reached it, the building seemed smaller and poorer than it had looked from a distance. Its windows were empty, and its roof was covered with moss. It was not noble or beautiful. It was only an old, wet, forgotten building.

Jaralson hardly looked at it. He led the way into the trees behind it. “This is the graveyard,” he said. The two men pushed through bushes and young trees, moving carefully because the ground was uneven and hidden by leaves.

Graves lay here and there among the growth. Some had old wooden boards at the head and foot. Some had low fences that were broken or falling down. Some had only a sunken place in the earth to show that a body lay beneath.

Trees had grown up from some of the graves. Their roots had pushed aside boards and fences. Leaves covered the ground, and the old paths had disappeared. It was a village of the dead that the living had left behind.

As the men moved through the wet undergrowth, Jaralson suddenly stopped. He lifted his gun and held it ready. Holker could not see what had caught his attention, but he also became still. For a moment they listened to the dripping water and the silence beyond it.

Then Jaralson moved forward. Under the branches of a great spruce lay the body of a man. The two officers stood above it without speaking. They looked first at the face, then at the clothes, then at the strange position of the arms and legs.

The body lay on its back, with the legs spread wide. One arm reached upward, and the other was bent, with the hand near the throat. Both hands were tightly closed. Everything about the body showed a desperate struggle.

A shotgun lay nearby. So did a game bag with dead birds inside it. Around the body, small plants had been bent and broken. Leaves had been pushed into rough lines beside the legs. Near the hips were clear marks where human knees had pressed into the earth.

Then they looked at the throat and face. The hands and chest were white, but the face and neck were dark purple, almost black. The head had been pulled back at a terrible angle. The eyes stared blankly backward, and foam filled the open mouth.

The throat showed the marks of two strong hands. They were not light finger marks. They were deep bruises and tears, made by a grip that had held on until long after death. The fog had wet the dead man's hair, face, and clothes, so that he looked as if he had been lying in rain.

"Poor devil," Holker said softly. "He had a hard end."

Jaralson looked around the graveyard with his gun still ready. "A madman did this," he said. "Branscom did it."

Then Holker saw something half hidden among the disturbed leaves. He bent down and picked it up. It was a small red leather pocketbook. When he opened it, he found white pages inside, and on the first page was the name Halpin Frayser.

On the next pages, words had been written in red. They were hurried and hard to read. Holker read them aloud. They were lines of poetry about an enchanted wood, whispering trees, blood on leaves, silence, fear, and unseen powers.

The lines stopped in the middle. There was no ending. It was as if the writer had been interrupted before he could finish. Jaralson listened, then said that the poem sounded like the work of Myron Bayne, an old poet he knew about from books.

Holker did not care about the poet. The morning felt cold to him now. He said they should leave and bring the coroner from Napa. Jaralson agreed, but as he moved away, his foot struck something hard under the leaves.

He kicked the object into view. It was a fallen wooden headboard. The painted words on it were old and difficult to read, but the two men could still make them out. The name was Catharine Larue.

Holker repeated the name with sudden excitement. He remembered something. Branscom had not been the murderer's real name. His real name had been Larue. And the woman he had killed had once been named Frayser.

The two men stood in the fog, looking from the headboard to the dead man.

Halpin Frayser had spoken the name Catherine Larue in the forest. Now his body lay near a grave with that same name. The mystery had opened under their feet like a hidden pit.

Jaralson said there was some dirty secret in the matter, and he hated secrets. Then, out of the fog, they heard a laugh. It seemed to come from far away at first, low and slow and without joy.

The laugh grew louder. It came nearer through the gray air. It was not the laugh of a happy person, nor even the laugh of a living mind. It was empty, cold, and hateful.

The two men did not raise their guns. They did not even think of using them. That sound did not seem like something a gun could answer. It came closer and closer until it seemed almost beside them.

Then, just as it had grown out of silence, it began to fade. The terrible laugh drew away into the fog. It became weaker, smaller, and farther off, until at last there was only the dripping of water from the trees and the dead man lying near the grave.

The Moonlit Road

Part 1 — Joel Hetman Jr.’s Statement

My name is Joel Hetman, Jr., and I have lived many years with a dark secret. Other people may think I have been fortunate. I have money, health, education, and a respected name. But these outward gifts have not made me happy, because my inner life is full of pain.

Sometimes I think I might have suffered less if I had been poor or forced to work hard every day. Hard need can give the mind something clear to do. It can make a person forget private sorrow for a little while. But I have had too much time to remember.

I was the only child of Joel and Julia Hetman. My father was a well-to-do country gentleman. My mother was beautiful, educated, and gentle. My father loved her deeply, but I later came to believe that his love was also jealous and demanding.

Our home stood a few miles from Nashville, Tennessee. It was a large house, built in an irregular way, not especially beautiful but full of family life. It stood a little way back from the road, among trees and bushes. To me, when I was young, it seemed safe.

At the time of the terrible event, I was nineteen years old. I was a student at Yale, far from home. One day I received a telegram from my father. The message was urgent, but it did not explain why I had to come home at once.

I obeyed immediately. I left my studies and traveled back to Tennessee as fast as I could. At the railway station in Nashville, a distant relative met me. His face told me before his words did that something dreadful had happened.

He told me that my mother had been murdered. She had been killed in a cruel way, and no one knew why. No one knew who had done it. The house had not been robbed, and there was no clear sign of the killer.

The facts, as people then understood them, were these. My father had gone to Nashville on business. He expected to return the next afternoon. But something

changed his plan, and he came home during the same night, just before dawn.

Later, he told the coroner what had happened. He said that he had no key and did not want to wake the sleeping servants. For no clear reason, he went around to the back of the house. Perhaps he thought he could enter more quietly there.

As he turned the corner of the building, he heard a soft sound. It was like a door closing gently. In the darkness, he saw the shape of a man. The figure disappeared almost at once among the trees on the lawn.

My father followed quickly. He searched the grounds for a short time. At first he thought the man might be secretly visiting one of the servants. But the search showed nothing, and the stranger was gone.

Then my father entered the house through the unlocked door. He went upstairs to my mother's room. The door was open, but the room was completely dark. As he stepped inside, he fell over something heavy on the floor.

I do not want to describe every detail. The thing on the floor was my mother. She was dead. Human hands had closed around her throat and taken her life.

Nothing had been stolen from the house. The servants said they had heard no sound. No weapon was found, because no weapon had been used. Only the terrible marks of fingers on my mother's throat showed how she had died.

No trace of the murderer was ever found. No one could explain why he had come. No one could explain how he had entered or how he had escaped. The man seen by my father vanished into darkness and left no name behind him.

I gave up my studies and stayed at home with my father. He was greatly changed. He had always been quiet and serious, but now his silence became heavy and strange. It was as if some part of his mind had gone away with my mother.

Nothing could hold his attention for long. Yet any sudden sound made him start. A footstep in the hall, a door closing too quickly, or a voice from another room could make him turn pale. Then he would fall back into the same deep sadness as before.

I was young, and youth protects the heart more than we understand at the time. My sorrow was real, but I did not yet know the full weight of loss. I still believed that life would continue in some possible way. My father seemed to know

something darker.

A few months after my mother's death, my father and I walked home from the city one night. The moon was full and stood high in the eastern sky. The country was very still. Our footsteps and the endless sound of insects were almost the only sounds around us.

The trees beside the road threw black shadows across the white moonlit ground. Between those shadows, the road shone pale and empty. As we came near the gate of our home, the front of the house was dark. No light showed in any window.

Suddenly my father stopped and caught my arm. His hand closed on me with painful force. In a voice hardly above a whisper, he said, "God! God! What is that?" His whole body had become stiff.

I listened, but I heard nothing. "I hear nothing," I said.

"But look," he said. "Look there." He pointed straight ahead along the road.

I looked where he pointed, but I saw nothing. The moonlight lay white on the road, and the trees made their black shadows. There was no person there and no moving shape. I told him gently, "There is nothing there. Come, Father. Let us go inside. You are ill."

He let go of my arm, but he did not move forward. He stood in the middle of the bright road, staring at what he saw, or thought he saw. His face in the moonlight was pale and fixed. I touched his sleeve and tried to lead him away, but he seemed to have forgotten that I was there.

Then he began to move backward. He took one step, then another, never taking his eyes from the empty road before him. I turned partly to follow him, but I did not know what to do. I do not remember feeling fear exactly, but a sudden cold passed over me from head to foot.

At that moment, a light appeared in an upper window of the house. One of the servants had awakened and lit a lamp. Why she did so, she could never explain. Perhaps some hidden warning had reached her in her sleep.

I turned for only a moment to look at the lighted window. When I looked back, my father was gone. He had disappeared from the moonlit road as completely as the unknown man had disappeared among the trees on the night of my mother's

death.

From that night to this day, no word of his fate has ever come to me. No body was found, no message arrived, and no person saw him again. He passed from my life into mystery. That is the secret that has followed me through all my years.

Part 2 — Caspar Grattan's Lost Life

My name is Caspar Grattan. At least, that is the name by which I have been known for many years. I write these words today because tomorrow I shall be dead. When my body lies here without sense or thought, people may ask who I was, and this is the only answer I can give.

I do not know whether Caspar Grattan was truly my first name. I gave the name to myself because I had no other. A man must have a name in this world. Without one, other people do not know how to speak of him, and he himself seems to have no place.

Some people are known by numbers instead of names. I know something of that horror, though I do not know why I know it. Once, long ago, I was walking in a street in a city far from here. Two men in uniform passed near me, and one of them looked closely at my face.

He said to the other man, "That man looks like 767." The number struck me like a blow. I did not understand it, but it filled me with shame and fear. I turned into a side street and ran until I fell down, weak and breathless, in a country road.

Since then, I have never forgotten that number. When it returns to my mind, other things come with it. I hear harsh laughter, dirty words, and the sound of iron doors. These memories are not clear, but they are terrible.

So I say again that even a name chosen by oneself is better than a number. Soon, perhaps, people will put my body into a poor grave. In some book, they may write both my name and a number. That will be more wealth than I have had in life.

Whoever finds this writing should understand one thing. This is not a full history of my life. I do not have the knowledge needed to write such a history. My

memory is broken, and many parts of it are missing.

Some memories are clear and stand in order, like bright beads on a string. Others are far away and strange. They are like red lights burning in a dark empty place. Between them are black spaces where nothing can be seen.

I stand now close to death and look back over the road by which I came. I can see about twenty years of that road. The footprints are not straight. They move through poverty, pain, fear, and lonely wandering.

Before those twenty years, I see almost nothing. There is only a cloud. I know that I must have had another life before then, because no man begins life as a grown man. Yet that is how my memory begins.

Most people do not remember their birth. They must be told when and where they came into the world. With me, the matter is stranger. My first memory is not of childhood at all. It is of being already a man.

I found myself walking in a forest. My clothes were poor and torn. My feet were sore, and my whole body was weak with hunger and tiredness. I did not know where I was, where I had come from, or where I should go.

After a while, I saw a farmhouse. I went to it and asked for food. The person there gave me something to eat and then asked my name. That simple question filled me with confusion, because I did not know the answer.

I knew that all people had names. I knew that I should have one too. But when I searched my mind, I found nothing. Shame and fear came over me, and I went away without explaining.

Night came, and I lay down in the forest to sleep. I was alone under the trees, with no past that I could name and no future that I could see. That was the beginning of the life I remember. If there was another beginning before it, it is hidden from me.

The next day I entered a large town. I will not name it here. There is no need to tell every small event that followed. I lived by poor work, by wandering, and by whatever hard chance offered me.

Always I was followed by one feeling. I felt that I had done some great wrong. I also felt that I was being punished for it. I could not remember the wrong clearly,

but I could not escape the punishment.

This is the worst kind of guilt. A man who remembers his crime may hate himself, but at least he knows why. I did not know. I carried the weight of a crime without knowing its full shape.

At times, I tried to reason with myself. I said that a forgotten crime might be no crime at all, but only sickness in the mind. Yet the feeling always returned. It was stronger than reason and older than my present life.

Sometimes certain pictures came before me. They were not clear enough to be called memories, but they were too strong to be called ordinary dreams. I seemed to have once lived near a great city. I seemed to have been a rich planter, with a wife and a son.

The wife in these broken pictures was beautiful, and I loved her. But my love was darkened by distrust. The son was harder to see. He was young and bright, yet he remained at the edge of the picture, never fully present.

These things came to me again and again. A large house, a road, a woman, a child, and a feeling of jealousy moved through my mind like shapes seen in fog. When I tried to look straight at them, they changed or disappeared. But they always returned.

I think now that these broken pictures belong to the hidden part of my life. They may be dreams, but they feel like memories. They come with too much pain to be empty. Somewhere in them lies the answer to what I am.

One scene comes more often than the rest. It begins on an evening when I leave my home and go toward the city. I tell my wife that I will not return until the next afternoon. But in secret, I plan to come back before morning.

I write this calmly now, but even these words make my hand unsteady. The scene stands before me like a door that I do not want to open. Beyond it is the part of the memory that burns. I will try to tell it next, if my strength holds.

Part 3 — The Murder Remembered

The scene that returns to me most often begins on an unlucky evening. I seem

to have been a rich planter living near a great city. I had a wife whom I loved, but I did not trust her fully. Love and distrust lived together in me, and together they made something dark.

That evening I decided to test her. It was a common, ugly kind of test, the sort of thing many jealous men have done in stories and in real life. I told my wife that I was going to the city. I also told her that I would not return until the next afternoon.

But I had already made my secret plan. I meant to come back before daybreak. I had prepared one of the back doors so that it seemed locked but was not truly fastened. I had also done something similar to the lock of my wife's room.

I do not defend this. I tell it because it belongs to the memory. Even now, when I am close to death, shame rises in me as I write. Yet the past does not change because a man is ashamed of it.

Before dawn, I returned to the house. The grounds were dark and still. I moved toward the back door quietly, like a thief near my own home. My heart was full of jealousy, anger, and expectation.

As I came near the door, I heard it open softly and close again. Then I saw a man move away into the darkness. I could not see his face. I could see only a figure passing among the trees.

Murder filled my heart at once. I ran after him without thinking. I wanted to catch him, know him, and destroy him. But he disappeared into the dark as if the night had taken him.

I searched for him, but I found nothing. No face, no name, no clear proof remained. Sometimes, even now, I cannot make myself believe that he was truly a man. He may have been only a shape made by my own madness.

But at that time I did not doubt. I was wild with jealousy and rage. I believed that my wife had betrayed me. I believed that the man in the dark had come from her.

I entered the house through the back door. I went up the stairs quickly and quietly. The house was black inside, but I knew its rooms and passages well. I reached the door of my wife's chamber and opened it without trouble.

The room was completely dark. I moved through it with my hands before me. I came to the bed and touched it. The covers were disturbed, but my wife was not there.

“She is below,” I thought. “She heard me come in and has hidden from me in the dark.”

I turned to leave the room and look for her. But in the darkness I moved in the wrong direction. Or perhaps it was the right direction, because it brought me to what I sought. My foot struck something soft in the corner.

She was there. My wife was crouching on the floor. Perhaps she was hiding from me. Perhaps she was only terrified and unable to speak. I do not know what she knew or what she feared in that moment.

I gave her no time to explain. I did not ask a question. I did not accuse her with words. My hands went at once to her throat, and my knees pressed down on her struggling body.

She tried to cry out, but I stopped the sound. Her body fought under me in the dark. I felt her hands move, and I felt the life in her trying to remain. Still I held her throat.

No words passed between us. That is the worst part of the memory. I killed her without hearing her voice. I killed her in darkness, without truth, without mercy, and without even the poor excuse of knowing.

At last she stopped moving. The body under my hands became still. The room was silent again. In that silence, the thing I had done stood before me more clearly than any person could have stood.

There the dream ends. I call it a dream because I cannot prove that it was memory. Yet it comes back too often and with too much force to be only a common dream. Again and again I return to that house, that room, and that darkness.

Each time, I make the same plan. Each time, I see the figure leave by the back door. Each time, I run after him and lose him. Then each time, I enter the room and find my wife in the corner.

After that, all becomes blank. I return to the poor life that I know as Caspar Grattan. Rain beats on dirty windows. Snow falls on my thin clothes. Wheels

sound in mean streets where I work for little money and sleep in poor rooms.

If the sun has shone in those years, I do not remember it. If birds have sung, I have not heard them in my heart. My life has been a long punishment, but the judge and the crime have remained hidden from me.

There is another vision, and it belongs to the same darkness. I stand in a road under the moon. The road is pale, and the shadows of trees lie across it. A great house stands near me, dark in front.

I know that another person is there, but at first I cannot tell who it is. Then I see white clothing in the shadow of the house. A woman steps out into the road and stands before me. She is my murdered wife.

Death is in her face. The marks are on her throat. Her eyes look straight into mine with a deep and terrible calm. They do not accuse me in words, but they know me.

That knowledge is more than I can bear. I step backward from her. Fear takes my whole body. Even now, as I write, the same fear returns and makes my hand almost unable to form the letters.

The vision breaks there, just as the other memory breaks. It begins in darkness and ends in darkness. I cannot say what happened next. I cannot say where I went or how I came back to the life that bears the name Caspar Grattan.

Now I am calm again. But calm is not freedom. It is only another form of punishment. Sometimes terror punishes me; sometimes memory punishes me; sometimes this cold peace punishes me most of all.

My punishment has lasted through the life I remember. But it is only a life sentence, and a life sentence ends when life ends. Today that term is finished. To all people, I leave the peace that was never mine.

Part 4 — Julia Hetman Speaks

I am Julia Hetman, and I speak from the other life through the medium Bayrolles. I know that such words will seem strange to those who still live in the body. Yet I can tell only what I know from the world where I now exist. I do not

offer proof; I offer my statement.

On the night of my death, I went to bed early. I fell asleep almost at once. Then I woke with a feeling of danger. I could not see anything, hear anything, or name any reason for fear, but the fear was there.

My husband was away from home. The servants were sleeping in another part of the house. These things were normal and should not have troubled me. Still, the fear grew until I could no longer lie quietly in the dark.

I sat up and lit the lamp beside my bed. I thought the light would help me. Instead, it made me more afraid. I thought that the light might shine under the door and show someone outside that I was awake and alone.

Then I put out the lamp. I pulled the bedclothes up around my head and lay still. I could not call out. I could not pray. Fear had taken away even the simple movements of my mind.

I do not know how long I lay that way. To the living, it may have been hours. To us who are dead, time is not the same. We remember fear, but not always the measure of it.

At last I heard footsteps on the stairs. They were soft and uneven. They came slowly, as if the person climbing could not see the way. That made them more terrible to me, not less.

I thought of some blind evil thing coming up through the house. I knew that this was foolish, but fear is not wise. Fear speaks many voices at once, and none of them tells the truth clearly. In that moment I believed each one.

The footsteps came nearer. I still did not cry out. I lay under the covers, shaking and waiting. The house around me seemed large, dark, and empty.

Then the door of my room opened. I do not know whether I saw my husband clearly before he touched me. Perhaps I only felt his nearness in the dark. Perhaps I knew him and did not understand what that knowledge meant.

I left the bed, or tried to leave it, in terror. I moved across the room and crouched in a corner. I may have hoped that the darkness would hide me. I may have hoped that the danger would pass by.

But it found me. A foot struck against me. Then hands closed around my throat.

They were the hands of my husband, though I could not speak his name.

I tried to cry out, but the sound was stopped. I struggled under him. My hands moved against his arms and clothes. My body fought for life because the body loves life, even when the mind is lost in fear.

He did not ask me anything. He did not accuse me. He did not give me time to answer a charge or explain a shadow. In darkness and silence, he killed me.

Then I passed from that life into this one. Do not think that death at once gave me full knowledge. The dead do not stand on a high hill and see all truth below them. We also move in darkness, though it is a different darkness.

We remain near the places and people that hold us. We hide in the old rooms and near the old windows. We look at the living while they sleep, and we long to speak. Yet we cannot speak in the way we once did.

I stayed near the house where I had been changed from a living woman into what I am now. I loved my husband and my son, and I also pitied them. I wanted them to know that I still existed. I wanted them to understand my love, my sorrow, and the wrong that had been done.

But I could not make myself known. If they slept, they would wake before I reached them. If I came near when they were awake, their living eyes frightened me. I who wished to comfort them was also afraid of them.

You who still live may not understand this. The dead fear the living just as the living fear the dead. We long for touch, speech, and love, but we are held away from them. We move in a world close to yours, yet separated by a hard law.

Sometimes that law is broken for a moment. Love or hate may become strong enough to open a way. Then we are seen. But we do not know how we appear to living eyes, and often we terrify the very people we most wish to comfort.

One night, I searched for my husband and my son, but I could not find them in the house. I looked through the rooms and around the lawn. The moon shone over everything. To us, the sun is lost, but the moon still remains.

I left the lawn and moved along the road in the white moonlight. I had no clear purpose. I was full of sorrow, and the road lay silent before me. Then suddenly I heard my husband’s voice.

I also heard my son's voice. My husband spoke in surprise and fear. My son tried to calm him and lead him away from whatever he saw. Then I saw them standing near the shadow of the trees.

My husband's face was turned toward me. His eyes were fixed on mine. At last, after all my effort and sorrow, he saw me. For one great moment, my terror disappeared.

I thought love had broken the law between the living and the dead. I believed he would understand. I must have cried out, though I do not know whether he heard words. I wanted to say, "He sees me. He sees me. Now he will know."

I moved toward him. I tried to smile. I wanted to go to his arms and comfort him. I wanted to take my son's hand and speak words that would join the broken family again.

But my husband's face turned white with fear. His eyes were like the eyes of a hunted animal. As I came forward, he stepped back. The more I tried to reach him, the more he feared me.

Then he turned and fled into the woods. Where he went, I do not know. That knowledge has not been given to me. He disappeared from me as completely as he disappeared from my son.

My poor son was left alone on the road. I have never been able to make him feel my presence. I have never been able to comfort him or tell him the truth in a way his living mind can receive. He carries the mystery, and I can only watch.

Soon he too must pass from the visible life. But even then, I do not know whether he will come to me. The world of the dead has its own separations. Love reaches far, but it does not always find what it seeks.

One of the Missing

Part 1 — The Scout

Jerome Searing was a private soldier in General Sherman's army. The army was facing the enemy near Kennesaw Mountain in Georgia. One morning, Searing stood with a small group of officers and spoke with them in low voices. Then he turned away, stepped over a low line of earthworks, and disappeared into the forest.

The soldiers behind the earthworks watched him go. No one called out to him, and he did not speak to them. Still, they understood that he had been given dangerous work. A man does not leave the line alone in such a place unless there is a serious reason.

Searing was only a private, but he did not usually serve in the ordinary ranks. He worked at division headquarters as an orderly. That word could mean many things in the army. An orderly might carry messages, help an officer, write papers, or do any special task that needed a quick and trusted man.

Searing had become more than a messenger. He was a scout. He was young, strong, sharp-eyed, and very brave. He was also an excellent shot, and his officers knew that he could move through woods with great care.

The general who commanded his division wanted clear information. He did not like to depend only on reports that passed from one officer to another. He wanted to know what was directly in front of him. For that reason, he often sent Jerome Searing into danger.

This time, Searing's orders were simple. He was to go as near as he could to the enemy's line. He was to learn whatever he could learn. Then he was to return and report the truth, not guesses and not brave stories.

In a few minutes, he reached the Federal picket line. The men there were lying in small groups of two or four behind little banks of earth. They had hidden their positions with green branches. Their rifles pointed forward through the leaves.

The forest stretched in front of them without a clear break. It looked solemn and empty. Yet everyone knew that armed men might be hidden anywhere among

those trees. The quietness itself seemed dangerous, because danger could be inside it.

Searing stopped for a moment in one of the rifle pits. He told the men what he was going to do. Then he went forward on his hands and knees and soon disappeared among the thick bushes.

One of the men watched the place where he had vanished. “That is the last of him,” he said in a low voice. “I wish I had his rifle. The enemy will hurt some of us with it.” The others said nothing, but they understood what he meant.

Searing moved on slowly. He used every hollow in the ground and every bush for cover. His eyes searched every dark place. His ears listened to every small sound. When a twig cracked under his knee, he stopped at once and pressed his body flat against the earth.

It was slow work, but it was not dull. Danger made every inch of the ground important. Still, no sign of excitement showed in him. His heart beat steadily, and his hands were as calm as if he were setting a trap for a small bird.

He thought, with a little dry humor, that it seemed to be taking a long time. Then he told himself that he could not have gone very far, because he was still alive. That thought made him smile. In such work, being alive was one way to measure distance.

He crept forward again. After a short time, he suddenly lay flat and did not move. Through a narrow opening in the bushes, he had seen a small mound of yellow clay. It was one of the enemy’s rifle pits.

He watched it for a long while. Nothing moved there. No rifle showed from it. No face looked out through the leaves. The mound seemed to belong only to the empty earth.

Very slowly, Searing raised his head. Then he lifted his body a little on his hands. He kept looking at the yellow clay all the time. At last he understood the signs before him.

The enemy was gone. The pit was empty. The silence was not the silence of hidden men waiting to shoot. It was the silence of a place that had been left behind.

Searing rose to his feet. He no longer needed to crawl in that exact spot, though

he still moved carefully. He held his rifle ready and walked forward through the abandoned line. His eyes continued to search for any soldier who might have been left behind.

He passed one empty rifle pit, then another. The small works had been made quickly and used hard. Now they looked poor and useless, like nests after the birds have flown. Here and there, branches lay bent or broken where men had hidden behind them.

Searing wanted to be certain before he returned with such important news. If he went back too soon and was wrong, he might bring danger to his own army. So he pushed farther ahead. He moved from cover to cover where the trees were thinner.

The forest began to open. Light came through in wider spaces. Ahead of him, beyond the trees, he saw the edge of a plantation. It was one of the sad, deserted farms that war leaves behind.

Broken fences lay in crooked lines across the land. Brambles had grown over places where people had once worked. The buildings stood empty, with dark openings where doors and windows should have been. They looked as if the people who lived there had gone away quickly and would never return.

Searing stopped inside a small group of young pines and studied the place. From there, he could see the field, the orchard, and the old farm buildings. He looked for smoke, movement, horses, or the shine of a gun barrel. He saw none.

Still, he did not trust the emptiness at once. A deserted place near an army can hide many things. An enemy soldier might be sleeping in a shed. A small guard might be waiting near the house. A single careless step could end the mission.

He waited and watched. The morning light lay quietly on the open ground. No dog barked, no person appeared, and no curtain moved in any window. Only the wild plants seemed alive there.

At last Searing decided that he could go farther. The abandoned plantation might give him the view he needed. From one of its higher buildings, he might be able to see where the enemy had gone. Holding his rifle close, he prepared to leave the shelter of the pines and cross the open field.

Part 2 — The Shot from the Sky

Searing left the young pines and crossed the open field quickly. He did not run in a wild way. He moved lightly, keeping his body low and his rifle ready. If any enemy had been hidden near the farm buildings, he wanted to see the man before the man saw him.

He passed through an old orchard. The trees were neglected, and the grass was high around their trunks. Some branches had been broken by weather or by soldiers passing through. No fruit was worth taking, and no human hand seemed to have cared for the place for a long time.

Beyond the orchard stood a small building apart from the other farm buildings. It was on a slight rise in the ground. From there, Searing thought, he might be able to see a wide area in the direction where the enemy had gone. It was not a strong place, but it was useful for looking.

The building had once been only one room raised on four tall posts. It had stood about ten feet above the ground. Now it was hardly a building at all. The floor had fallen away, and loose boards and beams lay under it in a broken pile.

The four posts no longer stood straight. They leaned in different directions, as if they were tired of holding the roof. Pieces of the floor still hung from above or rested at sharp angles against the ground. The whole thing looked ready to fall if a man touched it too hard.

Searing looked at it carefully. A foolish soldier might have passed it by because it was unsafe. Searing saw something else. The broken timbers and boards made a hiding place, and the raised ground gave him a view.

He slipped among the fallen pieces of wood. The old boards smelled dry and dusty. Some moved a little under his weight, and he stopped each time they made a sound. Then he found a place where he could lie partly hidden and look out across the open land.

In front of him, the ground stretched toward a spur of Kennesaw Mountain about half a mile away. A road climbed up and across that spur. On the road were

troops. They were moving away.

Searing's eyes became fixed and bright. The enemy had truly left the line in front of the Federal army. This was the information he had been sent to find. The road was crowded with Confederate soldiers, and their gun barrels shone in the morning sun.

He watched the long gray column move slowly up the road. Men, guns, and equipment all passed in order, though not in peace. They were the rear of an army pulling back. Dust rose around them, and sunlight flashed on metal as they moved.

Now Searing had done his duty. He should have turned back at once. His own officers needed this news quickly. The sooner he returned, the sooner the Federal command would know that the enemy's front line was empty.

But he did not move at once. The sight of the retreating soldiers tempted him. They were far away, but not too far for his rifle. He was a very good shot, and his weapon was made more exact than an ordinary rifle. It had a special sight and a very light trigger.

One shot would not change the war. Searing knew that. It might not even stop the retreat for a minute. But a soldier's work is to kill the enemy, and Searing had done that work often enough not to make a speech about it.

He settled himself more firmly among the broken boards. He chose a place in the distant column where men were close together. He thought coldly of the bullet flying into that group. It might make a wife a widow, a child fatherless, or a mother childless.

These thoughts did not stop him. War had made such thoughts common. They were part of the work. He pulled back the hammer of his rifle and set the trigger.

Yet that morning, Jerome Searing was not to fire. Many events, far from him and long before that hour, had already helped prepare another end for him. A man born in a distant village near the Carpathian Mountains had grown up, become an artillery officer, broken discipline, and fled his country. By a long chain of chances, he had come to America and joined the Confederate army.

That man now commanded a Confederate battery some distance away. He had nothing better to do for the moment while his battery waited to move. Looking

across the country, he saw shapes on a hill and mistook them for Federal officers. To amuse himself, or perhaps to show skill, he aimed a field gun in that direction.

The gun was not aimed directly at Searing. The artillery officer did not know that Searing was there. He did not know about the scout, the abandoned rifle pits, the old plantation, or the broken little building. He simply gave the order and fired.

At that same moment, Searing was looking along his rifle at the distant Confederate column. He was deciding where his single shot would do the most harm. His finger rested lightly near the trigger. His mind was calm and sharp.

Then he heard something in the air. At first it was a rushing sound, like the wings of a huge bird coming down from the sky. In an instant it grew louder. The sound became a rough, terrible roar.

Searing did not have time to understand it fully. The sound came too fast. It seemed to fall straight out of the bright morning above him. The air itself appeared to tear open.

The cannon shot struck one of the leaning posts that held the broken structure above him. The post burst apart as if made of dry sticks. Splinters flew in every direction. The shock ran through the whole weak building.

For one brief moment, the roof and hanging timbers seemed to hang in the air. Then everything came down. Boards, beams, dust, and pieces of old wood fell together with a great crash.

The sound filled the field. Dry dust rose in a thick cloud and hid the morning light. The little building, which had looked ready to fall, had fallen at last. It came down upon Jerome Searing before he could fire his rifle or carry his news back to the army.

Part 3 — Trapped Under the Ruins

For a time, Jerome Searing knew nothing. The crash, the dust, the broken wood, and the roar of the cannon shot all passed away from his mind. He was not in pain, because he was not yet fully awake. He lay under the ruins as still as the dead.

Slowly, sense came back to him. At first he knew only that he was lying down.

Then he knew that something heavy was pressing on him. After that, he began to feel pain in many parts of his body, though no single wound seemed to explain all of it.

He tried to move. He could not. The effort brought him more fully back to himself, and he opened his eyes. At once he saw that everything around him was changed.

Before the fall, he had been hidden among broken boards by choice. Now the boards held him prisoner. Beams, planks, and pieces of roof lay over him and around him. Dust filled the small spaces between them and made the air dry and hard to breathe.

He could not see much of the sky. A few thin lines of light came through cracks above him. They showed floating dust and the rough sides of old boards. The morning was still outside, but he seemed to be buried in a small wooden grave.

Searing remembered the sound in the air. He remembered the shot from the cannon. He remembered the post breaking apart and the roof coming down. Then he understood that the old building had fallen on him.

He made another effort to rise. Nothing answered except pain. His chest moved a little when he breathed, but the rest of his body seemed fixed in place. His legs were under a heavy mass of wood.

His left arm was caught somewhere beside him. He could not see it, and he could not pull it free. His right arm had more room. He moved that hand slowly in the dark space near his side, touching broken boards, splinters, and dust.

He tried to lift his head. Something held it too. He did not know whether it was a beam, a board, or the angle of the earth under him. The fact was enough: his head could not turn freely, and his eyes were forced to look almost straight ahead.

This angered him more than it frightened him at first. He was a soldier and a scout. He had been in danger many times. Being shot at was one thing, but being held like an animal in a trap was another.

He listened. Far away, he could still hear the sounds of war. They were not clear. There was a dull movement in the distance, perhaps the enemy retreating, perhaps his own army preparing to advance. The world had continued without

him.

That thought troubled him. He had learned important news. The enemy line was empty, and the Confederate troops were moving away. His duty had been to carry that truth back quickly. Now he lay under a fallen shed, unable to move even one step.

He tried again to free his legs. He pushed with all the strength he had. The broken wood did not move. Pain shot up through his body, and he stopped, breathing hard.

He rested for a little while. Then he tried to free his left arm. This also failed. Something held the arm tightly, and each pull only made his shoulder hurt more. He gave up that attempt too.

He turned his attention to his right hand. It was still free enough to search. He felt for anything that might help him lift or push the boards. His fingers found splinters, dirt, small stones, and the rough edge of a plank.

He thought he might be able to pull some of the pieces from above his legs. If he could loosen even one board, perhaps another would move. Then another. A trapped man thinks in small hopes because large hopes are too painful.

He moved his eyes carefully over the narrow space before him. In doing so, he saw something bright. It was a small ring of metal, directly in front of his face. At first he did not understand what it was.

The ring seemed to circle a black center. It was very close, not more than a short distance from his eyes. The blackness inside it was perfectly dark. He stared at it, trying to make his mind name the thing.

Then the answer came. The black center was not a hole in the wood. It was the inside of a gun barrel. The shining ring was the muzzle of his own rifle.

For a moment, he did not move or breathe. Then he understood more. His rifle had fallen with him and had been caught among the broken boards. The barrel now pointed straight at his face.

He closed one eye and looked along the weapon as well as he could. Then he closed the other eye and looked again. From each side, the line seemed slightly different. But when he judged both lines together, the truth was clear.

The rifle was aimed at the middle of his forehead.

He remembered, then, what he had done just before the cannon shot struck. He had cocked the rifle. He had set the trigger to make it very light. A touch, almost any touch, might fire it.

Uneasiness entered him, but not full fear. He was a brave man and had looked into gun barrels before. In battle, guns point at a soldier from many directions. A soldier's work often begins where another man's fear would end.

He even remembered an old battle with a kind of hard amusement. Once, during an attack, he had looked into the mouth of a cannon and had stepped aside just in time. On another day, the memory might have made him smile. Now it only showed him that he understood danger well.

Still, this danger was different. In battle, a man can run, fall, shoot, or take cover. Here he could do almost nothing. The weapon before him did not need an enemy's hand. It needed only a movement in the wreckage.

He turned his eyes away from the muzzle. The effort was small, but it helped him a little. He tried to think calmly. Panic would not lift a board, free a leg, or carry his report back to the general.

He searched again with his right hand. He reached slowly, carefully, so that he would not shake the wood that held the rifle. Every movement had to be measured. One careless pull could press something against the trigger.

He tried once more to move his feet, then stopped at once. The thought came to him that the boards on his legs might also be holding the rifle in place. If he shook them, the gun might fire. After that, he lay still.

The small ring of metal remained before him, waiting. It was not alive, but it seemed to watch him. In that narrow prison of dust and wood, Jerome Searing understood that he was trapped not only under the fallen building, but also under the eye of his own loaded rifle.

Part 4 — Fear and the Rifle

Searing turned his eyes away from the rifle for a while. He did not want to

look at the black hole in the barrel. It was only a piece of metal, he told himself. It had no will, no anger, and no wish to kill him.

Still, the thought did not help much. The rifle was loaded, and the trigger was very light. A small movement of the broken boards might be enough. A falling splinter, a shift of his own body, or even one unlucky breath might send the bullet into his head.

He tried again to use his right hand. He moved it slowly among the pieces of wood near him. His fingers were torn and bleeding, but he hardly noticed the pain at first. He was searching for some edge, some loose board, some tool made by chance.

He tried to free his left arm again. It did not move. He tried to move his head, but something still held it in place. This was almost as hard to bear as the rifle itself, because he could not even choose where to look.

Then he tried his legs. Strong muscles answered him for a second, and pain ran through his body. But before he pushed harder, he stopped. If the boards above his legs moved, they might move the rifle too.

That thought forced him back into stillness. He lay breathing carefully. He felt his breath enter and leave his chest, and even that small motion seemed dangerous. The world had become a trap made of wood, dust, and one gun.

He remembered another time in battle when he had faced a cannon. He had seen a round brass opening in front of him and had understood just in time what it was. He had stepped aside before the cannon fired. That memory had once amused him, but it did not amuse him now.

In those days, he had also once used his own loaded rifle as a club. Only afterward had he noticed that it had been ready to fire. He had often smiled at that foolish moment from his early soldier life. Now the memory came back without any smile.

He looked again at the muzzle. For a moment, he thought it had moved nearer. He knew that this was probably not true. Yet the black hole seemed larger than before, as if it were quietly growing while he lay helpless.

He turned his eyes away again as far as he could. Through a broken opening

in the ruins, he could see the tops of distant trees beyond the plantation. Their leaves looked light and soft against the sky. The sky itself was a deep blue, almost black above him.

He thought that it would become very hot there as the day went on. Then he wondered which way his face was turned. By the shadows he could see, he decided that he was looking north. North was the direction of his wife and children.

At once he became angry with himself. “What have they to do with this?” he said aloud. The sound of his own voice in the narrow space startled him. It seemed wrong that a human voice should come from that wooden grave.

He closed his eyes and tried to be calm. If he could not get out, he might as well rest. The enemy had gone, and some men from his own army would surely come that way sooner or later. They would find him and pull the boards away.

But he did not sleep. With his eyes closed, he began to feel a dull pain in his forehead. At first it was small, almost nothing. Then it slowly grew stronger.

He opened his eyes, and the pain stopped. He closed them, and the pain returned. It was as if the rifle had already fired in his imagination, and the bullet’s path had begun to ache before the bullet moved.

He opened his eyes again and stared at the sky. Birds were singing somewhere outside the wreckage. One bird gave a clear, metal-like call that sounded sharp and bright. The ordinary life of the morning went on above him, careless and free.

That ordinary life made his prison worse. The trees moved gently. The birds called. The sun climbed higher. Yet he could not lift one hand enough to push away death.

He told himself again that the rifle had not fired when the building fell. If it had survived that great crash, perhaps it would not fire now. But the argument worked only for a moment. Soon another thought answered it.

Perhaps the crash had brought the rifle close to firing. Perhaps the trigger was already held at the edge of movement. Perhaps the next small shake would complete what the falling building had begun. These thoughts came one after another and would not leave him.

He began to sweat. Dust stuck to the wet skin of his face. A drop ran slowly

down from his forehead toward one eye, but he could not lift a hand to wipe it away. Even that small discomfort became part of the torture.

His mouth became dry. He tried to swallow, but his throat felt tight. He wanted to call for help. Then he feared that the force of shouting might shake his body and the boards around him.

Still, the need to cry out grew stronger. He imagined men somewhere nearby, perhaps closer than he knew. If he stayed silent, they might pass without seeing him. If he shouted, they might hear and save him.

He opened his mouth and called. His voice sounded weak and strange. No answer came. He called again, louder this time, and the effort sent pain through his trapped body.

The rifle did not fire. That gave him a little courage. He shouted once more, then stopped and listened. Only the birds answered him, and their small clear sounds seemed almost cruel.

Then fear returned in a new form. What if no one came for hours? What if the sun rose high and burned him where he lay? What if night came before he was found? The rifle would still be there, waiting in the dark.

He looked again at the muzzle. The black hole was now the center of his whole world. The sky, the trees, the army, his wife, his children, and the war itself all moved far away. Only the rifle remained close and real.

His courage began to break. His jaw fell open. His eyes grew wide. A cold sweat covered him, and his body shook in every part, though he tried to hold it still. Then he screamed, not like a soldier calling for help, but like a man who had become pure fear.

Part 5 — Six O’Clock and Forty Minutes

Searing’s scream passed out through the cracks of the ruined building and died in the open air. No one answered. He listened with his whole body, but there was no human voice, no running footstep, and no call from the Federal line. The only sounds were the birds, the insects, and the faint far movement of war.

After the scream, he felt ashamed. He was a soldier, and he had seen death many times. He told himself that he must meet this danger like a man. But courage is not simple when a man cannot move and must look into the barrel of his own gun.

His mind began to fail him for short moments. Sometimes the world went away, and he seemed to sleep without rest. Then he would wake suddenly and find the same black circle before his eyes. Each return to consciousness was like being trapped again for the first time.

During one of these returns, he felt a sharp pain in his right hand. He moved his fingers and felt wetness. He could not see the hand, but he knew what had happened. In his terror, he had beaten it against the broken wood and filled it with cuts and splinters.

He tried to steady himself. He thought he would not scream again. He did not have deep religious faith, and he did not have great words to speak at the end. He was only a common soldier, but he wanted to die bravely if death had to come.

Yet one thought tormented him. He did not know when the rifle would fire. It might fire in the next second. It might not fire for hours. Waiting for the shot was worse than the shot itself.

Then small sounds came from the wreckage near his legs. Rats had lived in the old building, and now they came out from their hiding places. One ran over the pile of broken wood that held the rifle. Then another followed it.

At first Searing watched them almost calmly. Then a terrible idea came to him. One of the rats might touch the trigger. One small foot, one moving tail, or one falling piece of dirt might bring the bullet into his brain.

He cursed the rats and shouted at them to go away. His voice frightened them, and they disappeared for the moment. But he knew they would return. Later, if he were still alive, they might come to his face, his mouth, and his eyes.

The thought should have filled him with disgust, but even that horror was smaller than the rifle. The rifle had become his whole world. The pain in his forehead grew stronger, as if the bullet were already traveling slowly through his head.

He no longer thought of home. He no longer thought of his wife, children, country, army, or honor. Memory itself seemed to have been wiped away. There was only the broken building, the pain, and the black hole before him.

Time no longer moved in an ordinary way. Every beat of pain seemed endless. A second felt like a long life, and each new second brought another life of fear. The world outside might still have morning, light, and movement, but under the boards there was only waiting.

At last, his right hand found a long thin strip of wood. He pulled at it carefully. It moved a little. For the first time in many minutes, or perhaps many ages, he felt a small hope.

He worked the strip back and forth. He tried not to shake the wreckage too much. If he could use it as a tool, he might push away some piece of wood, or even move the rifle itself. Hope made his mind clear again.

The strip came free at last. It was not strong, but it was long enough to reach forward. Searing held it in his bleeding hand and studied the small space in front of him. He could not lift himself, but he could still fight.

First he tried to use the strip to break or move something near his legs. The effort failed. He had no good angle and no strength of position. The strip bent in his hand, and the broken boards did not move.

His fear came back with terrible force. The rifle seemed angry because he had tried to rebel against it. The black opening looked sharper and nearer. The pain in his forehead burned deeper than before.

Then a new idea came to him. If he could not escape the rifle, perhaps he could control it. He could make it fire by his own act, not by chance. The thought was horrible, but it was also simple. A soldier may choose the moment of his own death more calmly than he can wait for it without end.

His trembling stopped. He clenched his teeth. Slowly, he lifted the front end of the strip and pushed it forward through the wreckage beside the rifle. The movement had to be exact, because a wrong touch might fire the gun before he was ready.

The end of the wood touched the metal guard around the trigger. He moved it

carefully outward. He felt, rather than saw, that the strip had passed the guard. Now it was near the trigger itself.

Searing closed his eyes. He gathered all his remaining strength into his hand and arm. Then he thrust the strip hard against the trigger.

There was no explosion. The rifle had already fired when it fell from his hand as the building collapsed. The danger that had held him in terror for so long was already empty. But the truth came too late.

The rifle still did its work. Not by bullet, but by fear, it killed him. His body lay still under the broken boards, and the black barrel pointed at the face of a dead man.

Far back at the Federal picket line, Lieutenant Adrian Searing was in command of the guard. He was Jerome's brother. He sat behind the earthwork, listening carefully to every sound from the front. A bird call, the bark of a squirrel, or wind in the pines all reached his strained ears.

Suddenly he heard a faint rumble far ahead. It sounded like a building falling, softened by distance. Without thinking, he looked at his watch. It was six o'clock and eighteen minutes.

At that same time, an officer came from the rear and gave him orders. The colonel wanted the picket line to move forward and test the enemy's position. If they found no enemy, they were to continue the advance until ordered to stop. There was reason to believe the enemy had retreated.

Adrian Searing nodded and said nothing. Soon the men left their rifle pits and moved forward in a loose skirmish line. Their teeth were set, and their hearts beat hard. They did not know whether the forest before them was empty or full of waiting rifles.

The line swept across the plantation toward the mountain. Some men passed on one side of the ruined building, and some passed on the other. They looked ahead, not down into the broken wood. No one noticed the trapped body.

A short distance behind them came their commander. He looked at the ruin with passing curiosity and saw a dead man half buried under boards and beams. Dust covered the clothes so thickly that they looked gray, like the uniform of an

enemy soldier. The face was pale, wet, and changed by fear.

The officer did not see the rifle. From where he stood, it seemed clear enough that the man had been killed when the building fell. He did not know that the dead man was Jerome Searing. He did not know that the man had been alive and conscious after the fall.

“Dead a week,” he said shortly.

Then he moved on. Almost without thinking, he pulled out his watch, as if to check his own careless judgment of time. It was six o’clock and forty minutes.

Parker Adderson, Philosopher

Part 1 — The Captured Spy

"Prisoner, what is your name?"

The question was asked inside a Confederate general's tent at night. A candle burned on a small table, and its light moved over maps, papers, weapons, and faces. Outside the tent, the camp was wet and dark after a storm. Inside, three men stood or sat in the yellow light.

One of them was General Clavering. He was a high officer, used to giving orders and being obeyed. His face was handsome and calm, but there was hardness in it too. He sat with the quiet power of a man who could send others to life or death with a few words.

Before him stood the prisoner. The man wore the clothes of a Confederate soldier, but he was not one. He had been captured inside the lines with papers that could condemn him. He was a Federal soldier and a spy.

A guard stood a little to one side, holding his rifle. His duty was simple. He was there to watch the prisoner, not to speak and not to smile. His eyes stayed on the man in the candlelight.

The prisoner did not look frightened. He was thin, alert, and easy in manner, as if this were not a trial for his life. When the general asked his name, he answered almost lightly. "Since I will lose it tomorrow morning, there is no reason to hide it. Parker Adderson."

The general asked his rank.

"A low one," Adderson said. "Officers are too valuable to send into such dangerous work. I am a sergeant."

Then the general asked what regiment he belonged to. Adderson's expression did not change. He answered politely, but he refused to give the information. That answer, he said, might tell the Confederates something useful about the forces in front of them.

"I came into your lines to learn such things," he said. "I did not come to give

them away."

The general looked at him with interest. "You have wit," he said.

Adderson answered at once. "If you wait until tomorrow, you will find me dull enough."

The general asked how he knew he would die the next morning. Adderson spoke as if he were explaining an ordinary military rule. Spies captured at night were commonly shot or hanged at daybreak. He called it one of the customs of the profession.

The general smiled. It was a small smile, and it did not make the tent warmer. A man who had his favor might have been pleased to see it. A prisoner under his power had no reason to take hope from it.

The guard did not smile at all. If anything, his face became more serious. He may have felt that the prisoner's boldness was improper. He may also have felt that joking near death was not safe.

The general continued the questioning. He said that Adderson admitted being a spy. He had entered the camp in Confederate uniform to learn the number and position of the troops. This was enough to make the case plain.

Adderson corrected him with the same calm manner. He said he had especially wanted to learn the number of the troops. Their mood, he already knew. It was very bad.

The general's face brightened again. The answer amused him. The guard stood even straighter, as if his own seriousness could balance the prisoner's careless talk. The candle flame moved slightly in the air, and the shadows changed on the tent cloth.

Adderson seemed to understand the danger perfectly. He also seemed to enjoy speaking under it. Each answer was sharp, quick, and controlled. He did not beg, and he did not pretend innocence.

This made the scene strange. In an ordinary trial, a prisoner tries to save his life. He explains, denies, cries, or asks for mercy. Adderson did none of these things.

He spoke as if death were a matter for discussion, not an event that would soon

happen to him. His voice was steady. His face was open and almost cheerful. If fear was in him, it was hidden very well.

General Clavering watched him closely. This was not the first brave man he had seen. War had taught him that men could meet danger in many ways. Some were silent, some angry, some religious, some proud. Adderson met it with jokes and reason.

Yet the general did not forget what the prisoner was. A spy in wartime was not treated like a normal prisoner of war. A soldier captured in battle might live. A spy captured inside the lines in false clothing usually had little hope.

Adderson knew this as well as anyone in the tent. That knowledge gave his calm words a harder edge. He was not safe, and he did not speak as if he were safe. He spoke as if safety no longer mattered.

The guard shifted his weight slightly, then stood still again. The rifle in his hands caught the candlelight along the barrel. The small sound of rainwater falling from the tent outside could be heard between the voices.

The general's questions had already proved the main facts. Adderson had entered the camp in disguise. He had come for secret information. He had been caught before he could return to his own side.

Still, the general did not end the conversation. Something in the prisoner's manner held his attention. Perhaps he wished to study this man who joked at the edge of death. Perhaps he wished to test whether Adderson's courage was real.

Adderson seemed ready for whatever question came next. He stood in the candlelight with the calm air of a guest rather than a condemned man. His words had been light, but his position was deadly serious.

Outside, the storm had passed, and the night around the camp grew still. Inside the tent, General Clavering, the guard, and the captured spy remained together in the small circle of light. The trial had become more than a military matter. It had become a conversation with death waiting just beyond the candle.

Part 2 — Talking About Death

The general had already written the order for Adderson's death. The paper was now on its way to another officer. When morning came, the order would be read to the troops, and the prisoner would be executed. Adderson knew this, yet he still stood calmly in the tent.

Rain beat hard on the canvas above them. Sometimes the wind struck the tent so strongly that the whole cloth wall shook. The candle flame bent and rose again. In that small moving light, the general studied the spy's face.

"Do you want to make any arrangements?" the general asked. "Do you want to see a chaplain?"

Adderson answered lightly. He said that calling a chaplain would only take sleep away from another man. The answer was clever, but it also sounded cold. It made death seem like a small social matter, not the end of a life.

The general looked at him more sharply. "Do you mean to go to your death with only jokes on your lips?" he asked. "Do you understand that this is serious?"

Adderson's face showed no fear. "How can I know that?" he asked. "I have never been dead. People say death is serious, but no dead person has ever told me so."

For a moment, the general was silent. The answer interested him. He had seen brave men before, and he had seen men pretend to be brave. He could not yet decide which kind of man stood before him.

"Death is still a loss," the general said. "A man loses the happiness he has. He also loses all the happiness he might have had later."

Adderson shook his head a little. He said that a loss cannot hurt a person who never knows about it. A dead man is not sorry. He does not sit in the grave and regret that he is no longer at dinner, or in love, or in battle.

The general did not answer at once. Adderson went on, because the subject seemed to please him. He said that Clavering, as a soldier, had made many dead men. None of them had shown regret after death. None of them had complained of being dead.

The general said that perhaps being dead was not the painful thing. Perhaps the real horror was becoming dead. A man who still had the power to feel might

find the act of dying very unpleasant.

Adderson accepted this point as if it were part of an argument in a classroom. Pain, he said, was certainly unpleasant. He had never enjoyed pain. But a man who lives longer also has more chances to suffer pain.

“What you call dying,” he said, “is only the last pain. There is not really a special state called dying.”

The general’s eyes remained on him. Adderson raised one hand slightly, as if setting out a simple example. He spoke of trying to escape from the tent. Then, he said, the general would lift the hidden pistol in his lap and shoot him.

The general’s face changed for a second. He had been hiding a pistol there. He was amused and a little embarrassed that Adderson had noticed it. Then he smiled softly and said nothing.

Adderson continued. If the general shot him, he said, the bullet might enter his body. He would fall. He might suffer for half an hour. At the end of that time, he would be dead.

But during that half hour, Adderson said, each moment would be simple. At any given instant, he would be either alive or dead. If he was alive, he could feel and think. If he was dead, he could feel nothing. There was no third place between the two.

The same would be true in the morning. If he was hanged or shot, he would be conscious only while he was still alive. When death came, consciousness would end. Nature, he said, had arranged the matter in a way that was almost kind.

Then he smiled again. “It is so simple,” he said, “that it hardly seems worth the trouble of executing me.”

After these words, silence filled the tent. The rain kept falling. The wind pulled at the ropes and shook the canvas, but inside, neither man moved for several seconds. The candle made the shadows of both men jump on the cloth wall.

General Clavering’s face had become still. He looked at Adderson as if his eyes were guarding the prisoner, while his mind had gone somewhere else. Adderson’s words had not frightened him openly, but they had entered him. They had touched something private.

Perhaps the general was thinking of the men he had sent to death. Perhaps he was thinking of his own death, which every soldier carries like a hidden paper in his coat. He had power over Adderson now, but power does not make a man immortal.

Adderson stood quietly and waited. He seemed pleased with his own argument. His danger had not changed. The order was still written, and morning was still coming. But for the moment, he had made the general listen.

The silence lasted long enough to become uncomfortable. Adderson did not try to fill it. The general did not immediately take back command of the room. The sound of rain became louder because no human voice stood against it.

Then the general's face slowly returned to its usual calm. Whatever thought had taken him away had been put aside. He was again an officer in his own tent, with a captured spy before him and an army waiting outside.

Still, the conversation had changed the air between them. Adderson's words had made death sound small, almost reasonable. But that was only because death was still in the future. It had not yet stepped fully into the tent.

The prisoner could speak bravely while the morning seemed some hours away. The general could listen because the order was written and the danger belonged to another man. Neither of them yet knew how weak such brave thinking could become when death was brought very near.

Part 3 — Death Now

General Clavering sat silent for a little while after Adderson finished speaking. The storm outside had passed, and the night beyond the tent had become quiet. The rain no longer beat on the canvas. The silence after it seemed deep and unnatural.

The general's face changed in the candlelight. He looked no longer like a man fully in command of a prisoner. He looked like a man listening to some private fear inside himself. At last he spoke in a low voice.

"I would not like to die," he said. "Not tonight."

Adderson did not answer at once. Perhaps he thought that his words had reached the general more deeply than he had expected. Perhaps he thought that the conversation might continue until morning. In any case, he still stood there alive, and death still seemed a few hours away.

Then the tent opening moved, and an officer entered. He was Captain Hasterlick, the provost-marshal. His duty was to take charge of prisoners and carry out military orders. He saluted the general and waited.

The general seemed to return to himself. The distant look left his face. He became again an officer with a clear duty before him. “Captain,” he said, “this man is a Federal spy. He was captured inside our lines with papers against him. He has admitted what he is.”

Then the general asked about the weather. Hasterlick said that the storm was over and that the moon was shining. The answer pleased the general. It meant that the work could be done at once.

“Good,” the general said. “Take some men, lead him to the parade ground, and shoot him.”

A sharp cry broke from Adderson’s mouth. The calm man who had spoken so cleverly about death was gone in an instant. His neck stretched forward, his eyes opened wide, and his hands closed into fists. Fear had changed his whole face.

“God!” he cried. “You do not mean that. You forget. I am not to die until morning.”

The general looked at him coldly. “I said nothing about morning. That was your own idea. You die now.”

Adderson’s voice broke. He begged the general to remember the proper rule. A spy should be hanged, he said, and a hanging needed time. A frame would have to be built. Even one hour, even two hours, would matter. His words came faster and faster because each word was trying to push death a little farther away.

The general did not move. “Captain, follow my order,” he said.

Hasterlick drew his sword. He did not argue with the prisoner. He only pointed toward the tent opening. His meaning was clear: Adderson must go out.

Adderson did not move. Hasterlick stepped closer, took him by the collar, and

pushed him gently forward. It was not a violent push, but it broke the last part of Adderson's false courage. The prisoner moved toward the tent pole near the entrance.

On that pole hung the general's sword belt. In it were a sword, a pistol, and a large knife from his old civilian days. Adderson saw the knife. In one wild movement, he sprang toward it.

He seized the handle and pulled the knife free. Hasterlick tried to stop him, but Adderson thrust him aside. Then, with the fury of a man who had lost his mind through fear, he threw himself on General Clavering.

The general fell backward to the ground. Adderson fell on top of him. The table overturned, and the candle went out. In one second, the tent became completely dark.

The two men fought blindly on the ground. Hasterlick sprang forward to help the general. He fell across the struggling bodies. In the darkness, no one could clearly tell whose arm or sword or hand struck whom.

Curses, cries, and broken sounds filled the tent. The men struck, twisted, and rolled over one another. Then the tent itself came loose and fell down upon them. The heavy wet canvas covered the fighting men like a great dark net.

Private Tassman returned from his errand at that moment. He could not see clearly what had happened, but he understood that something terrible was taking place under the fallen tent. He threw down his rifle and pulled at the canvas with both hands. He tried to drag it off the men beneath it, but it caught on ropes, poles, and bodies.

The guard outside the tent heard the noise. He did not know what to do, and he did not dare leave his post. So he fired his rifle. The shot cracked through the quiet camp and carried the alarm everywhere.

At once the camp woke. Drums beat, and bugles called. Men ran out into the moonlight half dressed, putting on belts and jackets as they came. Officers shouted orders, and soldiers formed lines in the open ground.

This was fortunate. Once the men were in line, they could be controlled. The general's staff and escort rushed to the fallen tent. They lifted the canvas, pulled

away the broken poles, and separated the men who had fought beneath it.

One man did not breathe. Captain Hasterlick was dead. The large knife was driven into his throat, with the handle pressed under his chin. His own hand still held his sword so tightly that living men had trouble taking it from him.

General Clavering was alive, but badly hurt. He had bruises and two sword wounds. One wound was through his thigh, and another was through his shoulder. When they lifted him, he groaned and then fainted.

Adderson had suffered less in body. His right arm was broken, and his face was swollen and bloody. But his deepest wound was fear. He crouched on the ground and drew back from the men who tried to touch him.

His face was white under the blood and dirt. His eyes moved wildly. He spoke, but his words had no clear meaning. The clever prisoner, the calm thinker, the man who had explained death so neatly, was now shaking like a frightened animal.

The surgeon looked at him and said that he was not mad. He was only terrified. Then he asked who the man was. Private Tassman began to explain, and because he had been part of the night's events, he told the story with great care and much pride. But when he had finished, no one cared to hear it again.

General Clavering slowly came back to consciousness. He raised himself on one elbow and looked around. His eyes found Adderson, who was crouching near a campfire under guard. The general's voice was weak, but his words were simple.

"Take that man to the parade ground and shoot him."

One officer said the general's mind must be wandering. But the adjutant-general disagreed at once. He had the written order from Clavering about the prisoner. The same command had already been given to Hasterlick, who now lay dead. Therefore, he said, the order would be carried out.

Ten minutes later, Sergeant Parker Adderson of the Federal army was kneeling in the moonlight. He was no longer a philosopher and no longer a wit. He begged for his life in broken words that no one could put in order.

Twenty soldiers stood before him. Their rifles rose. The order was given, and the shots rang out into the clear midnight air. Parker Adderson fell dead.

At the same moment, General Clavering lay pale and still near the red light of

the campfire. He opened his blue eyes and looked gently at the people around him. “How quiet everything is,” he said.

The surgeon looked at the adjutant-general with a grave face. Clavering’s eyes closed for a little while. Then a soft smile came over his face, and he spoke very faintly.

“I suppose this must be death,” he said.

Then he died.

The Secret of Macarger’s Gulch

Part 1 — The Lonely Gulch

Northwest of Indian Hill, about nine miles away, there is a place called Macarger’s Gulch. It is not a large or famous place. It is only a narrow hollow between two low wooded ridges. A small stream runs there in winter, but by early spring the bed is usually dry.

Few people ever go into the gulch. Now and then, a hunter may enter it while following birds or other game. But even people who live only a few miles away may not know its name. There are larger hills and deeper hollows nearby that have no names at all.

The gulch is not easy to enter. The sides are steep and thick with bushes. In many places, there is almost no level ground beside the dry stream bed. A person walking there must often push through rough plants or step carefully over stones.

About halfway between the mouth and the upper end of the gulch, another smaller gulch comes in from the right. This smaller one is dry and short. Where the two meet, there is a little flat space of two or three acres. A few years before the events of this story, an old wooden house stood there.

It was hard to understand how anyone had built that house in such a lonely place. The boards and beams must have been carried there with great trouble. Perhaps, long before, the dry bed of the stream had been used as a rough road. Perhaps miners had once brought animals and tools into the gulch.

There had indeed been mining in the area. Men had searched the hills for gold or other valuable things. But they had not found enough to make the place important. No good road had been made, and no settlement had grown there.

The old house had only one small room. By the time of this story, it was already falling into ruin. It had no door, and the window frame was gone. The chimney, made of mud and stones, had fallen down into a poor heap covered with weeds.

There may once have been a few rough pieces of furniture inside. If so, hunters had probably burned them in their campfires. Some of the boards near the lower

walls had also been taken away for firewood. Near the house was the shallow remains of an old well, now little more than a wide dip in the ground.

One summer afternoon in 1874, I went up Macarger's Gulch from the narrow valley into which it opened. I followed the dry bed of the stream. I had come to shoot quail, and by the time I reached the old house, I had about a dozen birds in my bag.

Until that day, I had not known the house was there. I stopped and looked at it without much care. It seemed lonely and useless, but not especially interesting. After a short look, I went back to my hunting.

The birds were fairly easy to find that day. I followed them farther and farther up the gulch and along the rough ground. The afternoon passed quickly because my sport was going well. Only when the sun was low did I begin to think seriously about where I was.

Then I understood that I was far from any human home. I could not return to a house before dark. The gulch was too lonely, and the way back was too slow. I would have to spend the night where I was.

This did not greatly trouble me at first. I had food in my game bag. The old house, poor as it was, could give some shelter if shelter was needed. The night was warm, and in those foothills a man could sleep comfortably on pine needles without a blanket.

I also liked solitude. The night had never frightened me in ordinary times. I often found quiet places more pleasant than crowded rooms. So I soon decided to camp in the old house.

By the time full darkness came, I had made a simple bed in one corner of the room. I used branches and dry grasses. Then I built a small fire on the old hearth. The broken chimney still let most of the smoke pass upward.

The firelight changed the room. The cracked boards and empty spaces looked almost friendly in its glow. I roasted one of the quail and ate it slowly. I also drank the last of a bottle of red wine that I had carried with me because there was no water in that dry country.

The meal was plain, but I felt a deep comfort while I ate. The warm food, the

red light, and the roof above me were enough. Better meals in better houses do not always give a man such peace. For a short time, I was satisfied with my strange camp.

Yet something was missing. I had comfort, but I did not have a feeling of safety. Again and again, my eyes turned toward the empty doorway. Then they moved to the blank window, where there was no glass and no frame.

Outside those openings, the night was completely black. I could see nothing beyond the firelight. The darkness seemed to stand close to the house, waiting just outside the room. I told myself there was no reason to be afraid, but my eyes still returned to the door.

I thought of real dangers first. A bear might still be found in that part of the country, though not often. Then my mind turned to unreal dangers as well. A lonely ruined house in a hidden gulch can give shape to foolish thoughts.

I knew that such thoughts were not reasonable. Still, feelings do not always obey reason. In that room, on that night, the possible and the impossible both troubled me. The old house had become shelter, but it had also become a trap for the imagination.

Part 2 — The Dream of Edinburgh

I lay down on my bed of branches and dry grass near the old chimney. The fire was getting lower, but it still gave a little red light. The room was quiet, and outside the open doorway the night remained black. I told myself again that there was nothing to fear.

Yet the feeling of danger did not leave me. It grew stronger as the fire grew weaker. The open doorway became less clear, and the empty window became only a darker square in the dark wall. I kept looking at both of them, though I was angry with myself for doing so.

A man may feel braver outside under the open sky than inside a house with an open door. Outside, the whole dark world is around him, and he belongs to it. Inside, he is in a small bright place, and the darkness waits at the entrance. That

was how I felt in the ruined house.

The last small flame moved on the hearth. Then it became lower and thinner. I took my shotgun and turned it toward the doorway. My thumb rested near the hammer, ready to make the gun fire if anything entered.

This action made me ashamed. I had often spent nights alone, and I had always liked the darkness. I was not a superstitious man. I did not believe that every lonely place must hide a ghost.

Still, my body did not care about my opinions. My muscles were tight, and my breath had almost stopped. I listened with painful care, waiting for a step, a breath, or a movement outside the house. Nothing came.

After a while, the shame became stronger than the fear. I lowered the gun and laid it beside me again. I asked myself what I had expected to see. A bear might come, perhaps, but no bear had come. A ghost was still less likely.

I tried to laugh at my own foolishness. But the laugh did not come easily. The room remained dark, and the old house still seemed to hold some secret feeling of threat. My thoughts went round and round without finding an answer.

At last, while I was still wondering at my own fear, I fell asleep. I did not feel sleep come over me. One moment I was in the old house in Macarger's Gulch. The next moment, I was somewhere far away.

I dreamed that I was in a great city in a foreign country. The people there seemed partly like my own people, but their speech and clothes were a little different. I did not clearly know what made them different. In dreams, such things are often known without being explained.

A great castle stood above the city on a high place. I knew its name in the dream, but I could not say it. Below it were many streets. Some were wide and straight, with tall modern buildings, while others were narrow, dark, and twisting.

I walked through those streets without fear of being lost. I turned from one street into another as if I had been there many times before. Yet I knew that, in waking life, I had never walked there. The city belonged to me and did not belong to me at the same time.

I was looking for someone. I had never seen that person, but I knew that I

would recognize him or her when found. This did not seem strange in the dream. I moved with purpose, as if some clear plan guided my feet.

At last I stopped before a low door in a plain stone house. It was the kind of house where a good workman or small shopkeeper might live. I did not knock. I opened the door and went inside.

The room was simple and not very full of furniture. A single window gave light through small diamond-shaped panes of glass. Two people were there, a man and a woman. They did not look at me or show surprise when I entered.

This also seemed natural in the dream. They sat apart from each other, doing nothing. They were not speaking. The silence between them felt heavy, as if angry words had been spoken before I came.

The woman was young and rather full in body. She had large fine eyes and a grave, beautiful face. A plaid shawl lay around her shoulders. I cannot remember every detail of her face, but I clearly remember the sorrow and seriousness of it.

The man was older. He was dark, and his face was evil and hard. A long scar ran from near his left temple down toward his black mustache. The scar seemed almost separate from the face, as if it had a life of its own.

As soon as I saw them, I knew they were husband and wife. I knew it without being told. I also felt that I had found the people I had been seeking. The purpose of my strange walk through the city had brought me to them.

What happened next is not clear in my memory. The dream began to mix with waking thoughts. The room in the stone house and the ruined room in the gulch seemed to lie over one another. One picture faded through the other.

For a moment, I seemed to see both places at once. The foreign room, the woman in the shawl, the dark man with the scar, the old house in the gulch, the hearth, and the open doorway all joined together in my mind. Then the city began to disappear.

I woke fully. I was again in the old house in Macarger’s Gulch. The fire had not completely died. A stick had fallen among the coals, and the small flame had returned enough to show the room.

My fear was gone for the moment. The dream had somehow pushed it away. I

sat up, pulled the coals together, and lit my pipe. Then I began to think about what I had seen in sleep.

At first, I could not understand why the dream seemed important. It had been only a foreign city and two unhappy people in a room. Yet it held my mind strongly. It was as if some part of me knew more about it than I did.

Then I suddenly recognized the city. It was Edinburgh. I had never been there, but I had seen pictures and read descriptions. That must have given my sleeping mind its streets, its old houses, and its castle.

Still, the explanation did not satisfy me. Something in the dream felt too direct, too personal. I thought of the man and woman again. Without meaning to speak, I said aloud, “Surely the MacGregors must have come here from Edinburgh.”

The words surprised me only after I had said them. At the moment, they had seemed perfectly natural. I had named the people in my dream as if I had always known their name. Then reason returned, and I saw how foolish this was.

I laughed at myself. I knocked the ash from my pipe and lay down again on the bed of branches. The dream, the city, and the MacGregors began to seem less serious. I watched the fire grow lower and tried to let my thoughts become quiet.

The last flame bent low over the coals. For a second it seemed to gather itself. Then it rose suddenly, thin and bright, and went out into the air. The room was left in complete darkness.

Part 3 — The Cry in the Dark

The darkness was complete. The last flame had gone out, and for a moment its shape still seemed to live in my eyes. Then even that memory of light disappeared. I lay on my bed of branches and felt the whole old house close around me.

At that instant, I heard a heavy sound on the floor. It was dull and dead, as if a large body had fallen inside the room. The floor shook under me. I sprang up at once and reached for my gun.

My first thought was of a wild animal. I imagined that a bear had leaped in through the open window. The thought was terrible enough, but what followed

was worse. While the weak old house still trembled from the fall, I heard the sounds of a struggle.

There were blows on the floor. Feet moved quickly and roughly across the boards. Something struck the wall or the ground with force. Then, from very near me, came the sharp cry of a woman in terrible pain.

I had never heard such a cry before. I had never even imagined one. It entered me like a knife and took away all courage. For a few moments, I was conscious of nothing except my own fear.

Then my hand found the gun. The touch of the familiar weapon gave me some control over myself. I jumped to my feet and stared into the darkness. My eyes tried to break through it, but at first they could see nothing.

The violent sounds had stopped. There were no more blows and no more moving feet. But another sound came from the room, and it was more terrible because it was weaker. It was the faint, broken breathing of some living thing that was dying.

The gasps came at long intervals. Each time, I waited for the next one with fear. I could not tell where they came from. They seemed close enough for my hand to reach, yet the darkness gave them no place.

I stood holding the gun and listening. My body was tight, and my mouth was dry. I wanted to speak, but I did not dare. The room felt crowded with a horror that I could not see.

Slowly, my eyes became used to the darkness. The coals on the hearth gave a very weak red light. First I could see the doorway and the window, both blacker than the walls around them. Then I began to see the line between the wall and the floor.

A little later, I could see the full space of the room from one end to the other. There was nothing there. No bear stood by the window. No person lay on the floor. No woman, no attacker, and no dying body could be seen.

The silence had become complete. Even the gasping had stopped. This was not a relief. The silence after such sounds was like a second darkness, deeper than the first.

With one hand still holding my gun, I bent down and found the coals. My other hand shook a little. I gathered the fire together and put on more wood. Soon a small flame rose, then another, and the room filled again with red and yellow light.

I made a careful search of the place. I looked at the floor, the walls, the doorway, and the empty window. I examined the corners and the space near my bed. There was no sign that anyone had entered.

Dust covered much of the floor. My own footprints were clear in it. They showed where I had moved before lying down and where I had jumped up after the sound. But there were no other footprints.

No board was newly broken. No blood showed on the floor. No clothing, no hair, no mark of a struggle could be found. The room looked exactly as it had looked before, except that my own fear now seemed to have changed it.

I went to the doorway and looked out. The darkness outside was too thick to enter with my eyes. I did not step beyond the room. I had no wish to go out into that black gulch and search among the bushes for what I had heard.

Instead, I turned back to the fire. I pulled loose a thin board from the inside wall and broke it for fuel. I did not like damaging the old house, but at that moment I cared more about light than about ruins. I was determined that the fire should not go out again.

I lit my pipe and sat near the hearth. My gun lay across my knees. The smoke from the pipe rose into the broken chimney and disappeared. The fire cracked softly, and every small sound made me turn my head.

I tried to reason with myself. I had heard something, or I believed I had heard it. Perhaps the sounds had come from a dream not yet fully left behind. Perhaps the dream of the foreign city had followed me into waking.

But the floor had shaken beneath me. My whole body remembered that. My ears remembered the blows and the woman’s cry. These memories were too strong to dismiss as a dream.

At the same time, the room gave no proof. A real struggle should have left signs. A body falling should have made marks. Human feet should have disturbed the dust. Yet the dust showed only my own movements.

This conflict troubled me more than a simple danger would have done. If a bear had entered, I could have shot it. If a thief had come, I could have faced him. But I did not know how to meet a sound that had no body and a cry that left no trace.

The rest of the night passed slowly. I did not sleep again. I smoked, fed the fire, and watched the doorway and the window. The darkness outside remained patient, as if it had all the time in the world.

Once or twice, I thought I heard something move beyond the house. I lifted the gun and waited. Nothing came in. After a while, I understood that I was hearing ordinary night sounds, made strange by my own fear.

Still, I would not let the fire die. I kept breaking small pieces of board and adding them to the coals. The flames were never large, but they were enough. Their light held back the room, the doorway, and my imagination.

When morning finally came, it did not arrive all at once. The black window became gray. The doorway opened little by little into the shapes of bushes, stones, and pale sky. The old house became only an old house again.

I looked once more around the room in the clear light. There was still nothing to explain the night. The floor, the walls, and the open spaces showed no sign of any visitor. I packed my things, took my birds and my gun, and left Macarger's Gulch with a mind that was far less peaceful than when I had entered it.

Part 4 — The Photograph

Some years later, I met a man named Morgan in Sacramento. A friend in San Francisco had given me a letter of introduction to him. One evening, I dined at his house. While we sat there, I noticed several hunting trophies on the wall.

They showed that Morgan liked shooting. When we began to speak of hunting, he told me about some of the places where he had gone. Then he mentioned the same region where I had once spent that strange night. At once, the memory of Macarger's Gulch returned to me.

I asked him suddenly, "Mr. Morgan, do you know a place there called

Macarger's Gulch?"

"I have good reason to know it," he answered. "Last year I gave the newspapers the story about the skeleton found there."

I had not heard of this. At the time, I had been away in the East. But his words struck me so strongly that I could hardly sit still. I waited for him to go on.

Morgan then said that the name of the gulch was not quite right. It should have been called MacGregor's Gulch. As he spoke, something happened to me. I dropped my wine glass, and the wine spilled across the table.

Mrs. Morgan looked at me in surprise. Morgan said lightly that I had upset my wine. That was not exactly true. I had simply let the glass fall from my hand.

When the table had been put right again, Morgan continued. He said that there had once been an old hut in the gulch. Before his visit, it had been blown down or blown apart by weather. The boards and pieces of the building were scattered everywhere.

Among the remains of the floor, Morgan and another man had found a piece of plaid shawl. It lay between two of the heavy timbers that had once supported the floor. When they examined it, they discovered that it was wrapped around the shoulders of a woman's body.

Little of the body remained except bones, dry skin, and pieces of clothing. Morgan smiled and said that he would not describe too much, because Mrs. Morgan was present. His wife did not look especially frightened. She seemed more disgusted than sad.

Morgan said only what was needed. The woman's skull had been broken in several places. The blows seemed to have been made by some heavy, blunt object. Under the boards nearby, they had found a pick handle stained with old blood.

He then made a careless joke about married people and quarrels. Mrs. Morgan answered calmly, as if she had heard such jokes from him many times before. Their ordinary talk around that terrible story made me feel even more uneasy.

Morgan went on. The dead woman had been named Janet MacGregor. The coroner's jury had said that she had been killed by blows from some person unknown. But the evidence strongly pointed toward her husband, Thomas

MacGregor.

Thomas MacGregor had disappeared. No one had found him. No one had heard from him. It had been learned that he and his wife had come from Edinburgh.

At the word Edinburgh, I felt the old dream rise before me as clearly as if I were again in the ruined house. I saw the foreign city, the old streets, the room with the diamond-shaped window, and the woman with the plaid shawl. I also saw the dark man with the scar.

I tried to remain calm. Morgan noticed something wrong and spoke to his wife again. He said that I had put water into my plate. In truth, I had dropped a chicken bone into my finger bowl without knowing what I was doing.

Then Morgan said that he had found a photograph of Thomas MacGregor in a small cupboard. The photograph had not helped anyone catch him. But, he added, he still had it.

I asked if I might see it. My voice sounded strange to me, but I hoped the others did not notice. Morgan rose, found the photograph, and handed it to me.

I looked at the picture. It showed a dark man with a hard, evil face. A long scar ran from near his temple down into his black mustache.

It was the man from my dream.

I held the photograph for a moment longer than was natural. The room around me seemed to move away. The dinner table, the lamps, the walls, and Mr. and Mrs. Morgan all became less real than the old hut in the gulch and the dream city of Edinburgh.

Then I gave the picture back. I had no wish to explain what I knew, or what I thought I knew. Some truths are too strange to speak at a dinner table. They also sound foolish when placed in ordinary words.

Morgan asked, in his friendly way, why I had asked about Macarger's Gulch. I needed an answer quickly. I said that I had once lost a mule near there and that the memory had upset me.

It was a poor lie, but it served. Morgan accepted it, or seemed to accept it. Then he made another joke to his wife about my confusion, saying that the loss of my mule had put pepper into my coffee.

I said nothing more about the matter. But inside me, the old night was alive again. The dream, the woman’s cry, the fall on the floor, the plaid shawl, the broken skull, and the photograph had come together at last.

I left Morgan’s house with the truth still unspoken. I had gone into Macarger’s Gulch by chance. I had slept in a ruined house by chance. But what I had dreamed and heard there was not chance, or at least it did not feel like chance to me.

The secret of the gulch was no longer only a story about a dead woman and a missing man. It was also part of my own memory. I had seen, in sleep, the faces of the dead woman and her killer before I knew their names.

A Watcher by the Dead

Part 1 — Alone with the Body

In an upper room of an empty house in San Francisco, the body of a man lay under a sheet. The house was in the North Beach part of the city. It was about nine o'clock in the evening. One small candle gave the room its only light.

The night was warm, but both windows were closed. Their blinds were pulled down, so no one could see in or out. This was strange, because people usually like to give a room with a dead body as much air as possible. But this room had been shut up tightly.

There was very little furniture. An armchair stood near the fireplace. A small stand held the candle. A long kitchen table stood in the middle of the room, and the dead man lay upon it.

The chair, the stand, the table, and the body all looked as if they had been brought there recently. They were clean. But the rest of the room was covered with dust. Cobwebs hung in the corners where the walls met the ceiling.

The sheet over the body showed its shape clearly. Even the face could be guessed through the cloth. This was not because every dead face looks that sharp. It was because the man had probably been made thin by sickness before death.

The room did not face the street. That was clear from its silence. In truth, the back of the house stood close against a hill. Outside the windows there was not a street full of lamps and voices, but a dark wall of rock.

At nine o'clock, a church bell nearby began to strike. It sounded slow and lazy, as if even the bell did not care much about time. While it was still striking, the door of the room opened. A man entered and walked toward the body.

As soon as he came in, the door closed behind him. Then he heard the sound of a key turning with difficulty. The lock clicked. Footsteps moved away in the hall outside, and the man seemed to be a prisoner.

He walked to the table and looked down at the covered body. Then he gave a small movement of his shoulders, almost like a shrug. He did not appear greatly

troubled. After a moment, he went to one of the windows and raised the blind.

Outside was complete darkness. The glass was covered with dust. He wiped a little of it away and looked out. Strong iron bars crossed the window only a few inches beyond the glass. They were fixed deep into the wall on both sides.

He examined the other window. It was the same. He did not try to open it. He showed no great surprise and no strong anger. If he was locked in, he seemed ready to accept the fact calmly.

After he had looked around the room, he sat in the armchair. He took a book from his pocket. Then he pulled the small stand and the candle near him and began to read.

The man was young, not much more than thirty. His skin was dark, and his face was thin. He had brown hair and no beard. His gray eyes were steady and moved only when he had a clear reason to move them.

Most of the time, his eyes stayed on the book. Now and then, however, he looked toward the body on the table. He did not seem drawn to it by fear or horror. He looked at it more as a man might look at a clock, simply remembering where he was.

He was watching beside the dead. He seemed to be doing that duty with intelligence and self-control. If fear touched him, it did not show. The room was still, the candle was small, and the covered body lay close by, but the man read quietly.

After about half an hour, he came to the end of a chapter. He closed the book and put it away. Then he rose, took the small stand, and carried it into a corner near one of the windows. After that, he lifted the candle and returned to the fireplace.

A moment later, he went to the table. He lifted the sheet from the body's head. Under it was dark hair and a thin cloth over the face. The features showed sharply beneath that cloth.

Holding the candle in one hand, he shaded his eyes with the other and looked at the dead man. His expression remained serious and calm. When he had looked long enough, he covered the face again and returned to his chair.

He took some matches from the candleholder and put them into the side pocket of his coat. Then he lifted the candle and studied it carefully. It was very short. In another hour, perhaps less, it would burn out.

He put the candle back. For a few seconds, he watched the small flame. Then he did something that seemed bold, or perhaps only practical. He blew it out.

Darkness filled the room at once. The dead man remained on the table. The young man sat beside him in the blackness, saving the last little piece of candle for later.

Part 2 — The Wager

Earlier that night, three young doctors sat around a table in an office on Kearny Street. They were drinking punch and smoking cigars. It was almost midnight, and they had already drunk enough to make their talk loose and bold. The office belonged to Dr. Helberson, the oldest and most serious of the three.

Dr. Helberson was about thirty years old. The other two were younger. One was named Harper, and he was not yet a full doctor, though he was studying medicine. The third was Dr. Mancher, who sat lazily and listened with sleepy eyes.

Their talk had turned to death. This was not strange for doctors. They knew sick rooms, dead bodies, and the ordinary facts of the human body. Yet knowing facts about death is not the same as being free from fear.

Dr. Helberson said that living people have a deep fear of the dead. He said this fear is passed down through families and cannot be cured. A man need not feel ashamed of it, he said, any more than he should feel ashamed of being bad at numbers or having a natural weakness for telling lies.

The others laughed. Harper asked whether a man should not be ashamed of lying. Helberson answered that a tendency to lie and the act of lying were not the same thing. He spoke with the calm voice of a man who enjoys making small distinctions.

Dr. Mancher asked whether this fear of the dead truly existed in everyone. He said he himself did not feel it. He spoke lightly, as if the matter had little to do

with him. Perhaps he believed what he said, and perhaps the punch helped him believe it.

Helberson answered that the fear was still inside him. It only needed the right conditions to appear. Doctors and soldiers, he admitted, might be freer from it than other people. They were used to dead bodies and danger.

Mancher joked that he should also add hangmen and killers to the list. Helberson replied that public executioners did not see death often enough to become fully used to it. The tone of the conversation was half serious and half cruel. The men were young enough to play with ideas that should perhaps have been handled more carefully.

Harper then asked what conditions would make any man feel that fear strongly. Helberson thought for a moment. Then he gave his answer slowly, adding one condition after another. A man would have to be locked up all night with a corpse, alone, in a dark room, in an empty house, with no bed covers to pull over his head.

Harper listened to the long list and smiled. When Helberson finished, Harper said he knew a man who would accept every condition for any amount of money. The man's name was Jarette. He was a stranger in San Francisco, but Harper knew him from his own town in New York.

Helberson became interested. He asked whether Jarette had money. Harper said he had plenty, and that Jarette liked betting almost more than eating. As for fear, Harper added, Jarette probably thought it was some kind of skin disease or a strange religious mistake.

Helberson then asked what Jarette looked like. Harper glanced toward Mancher and said that Jarette looked very much like him. He might almost be Mancher's twin brother. This amused the others for a moment.

Helberson accepted the challenge at once. He did not seem to pause and consider whether the plan was wise. He had spoken boldly about fear, and now he had a chance to prove his words. Pride and drink both pushed him forward.

Mancher, who was becoming sleepy, asked if he could take part. Helberson said he did not want Mancher's money. Mancher then answered in a lazy voice that he would be the corpse. The others laughed, because the idea sounded absurd.

But the absurd idea did not disappear. In that room, among young men full of drink, smoke, and pride, it became a plan. Jarette would be locked in an empty house with a dead body for the night. If he stayed until morning without losing courage, he would win the bet.

The problem, of course, was the body. A real corpse from a hospital or a patient would have made the matter very serious and perhaps dangerous for the doctors. But Mancher had offered himself as the corpse, and the other two accepted the offer. What began as a joke became a cruel trick.

Mancher looked enough like Jarette to make the plan easier in another way. In the dim candlelight of a closed room, under a sheet, no one would easily know the difference. Mancher could lie still on the table. Jarette would believe that he was alone with a dead man.

The house used for the test belonged to Dr. Helberson. It was empty and had not been lived in for a long time. Its upper room was dusty, silent, and shut away from the street. Iron bars on the windows made escape impossible.

They brought into the room a chair, a small stand, a candle, and a long kitchen table. Mancher lay on the table and let himself be covered with a sheet. A thin cloth was put over his face so that his features would look sharper and more like those of the dead.

Then Jarette was brought in. He believed that he was accepting a brave and foolish wager. He knew he would be locked in the room. He knew the windows had bars. He knew he must spend the night with what he thought was a corpse.

Helberson and Harper left him there. They turned the key in the lock and went away. To them, the trick may have seemed clever. They thought Jarette would sit through the night, perhaps afraid, perhaps proud, and then they would open the door in the morning.

They did not yet know how dangerous fear can become. They did not yet know what a living man might do when he believes himself alone with death. They did not know what Mancher, lying under the sheet, might choose to do if he heard fear in the room.

So the mad wager was set in motion. Jarette sat in the dark room beside the

body. Mancher lay on the table pretending to be dead. Helberson and Harper went out into the night, leaving both men locked together until morning.

Part 3 — The Night Fear

Jarette blew out the candle because he wanted to save it. The candle was short, and he did not know what might happen before morning. If the darkness became too hard to bear, a little light might help him. Even if he only wanted to see his watch, the candle would still be useful.

After he set the candle on the floor beside him, he leaned back in the armchair and closed his eyes. He expected to sleep. He hoped that sleep would carry him through the long night quickly. But sleep did not come.

In fact, he had never felt less sleepy in his life. His mind was too awake, and the darkness made it sharper. After a few minutes, he gave up trying to rest. He opened his eyes, though opening them made almost no difference.

The room was completely black. He could not walk about without striking the furniture. He might knock over the stand, hurt himself, or crash into the table. Worse still, he might touch the body by accident.

He told himself that this last thought was only respect for the dead. A dead man, he thought, had the right to lie quietly. It would be wrong to stumble against the table and disturb the body. This sounded reasonable, and for a while he almost believed it.

But another part of him knew the truth. He stayed in the chair because he did not want to move in the dark. The covered body was only a few steps away, and not seeing it made it worse. In darkness, the mind gives shape to what the eyes cannot check.

As he sat there, he thought he heard a faint sound from the direction of the table. It was very soft, and he could not have said what kind of sound it was. He did not turn his head. There would have been no use in turning, because he could see nothing.

Still, he listened. He listened so carefully that his whole body seemed to

become one ear. Then a strange weakness came over him. His head felt light, his ears rang, and his chest seemed tight under his clothes.

For a moment, he wondered if these were signs of fear. Then he took a long, great breath, and the weakness passed. Only then did he understand what had happened. He had been listening so hard that he had almost stopped breathing.

This discovery angered him. He rose suddenly and pushed the chair away with his foot. He wanted to prove that he was not a coward, not a fool, and not a child frightened by darkness. So he began to move across the room.

But no man can stride far in complete darkness. After a few steps, he slowed and began to feel with his hands. Soon he found the wall. He followed it to a corner, then along the next wall past the two windows.

At the next corner, he struck the small reading stand and knocked it over. The sudden noise was loud in the closed room. It startled him so much that he cursed under his breath. Then he was angry again, this time because he had forgotten where the stand was.

“How could I forget that?” he muttered. The sound of his own voice helped him a little. It made the room seem more ordinary. He kept one hand on the wall and followed it until he reached the fireplace.

He decided that he should put things back in order. First, he searched the floor for the candle. His hands moved over dust, wood, and cold empty space before they found it. Then he took out a match and lit the small wick.

The little flame returned, weak but beautiful. At once he turned his eyes toward the table. Nothing had changed. The sheet lay over the body as before, and the sharp outline beneath it had not moved.

Jarette looked around the room with the candle in his hand. He raised it and moved it slowly, sending the deeper shadows into the corners. The fallen stand remained on the floor, but he forgot about setting it upright. His first need was to make sure that nothing in the room had changed.

Then he crossed to the door. He took the knob and pulled with all his strength. The door did not move. For some reason, this seemed to comfort him, as if a locked door proved that nothing could enter.

While looking at the door, he noticed a bolt that he had not seen before. He pushed it into place, making the door even more secure. This action gave him a small feeling of control. It was foolish, perhaps, because he was locking himself in more firmly, but fear often accepts foolish comfort.

He returned to the chair and looked at his watch. It was only half past nine. He started in surprise and held the watch to his ear. It was still ticking; time had not stopped. The night simply had a long way to go.

The candle was already shorter. Its little flame had eaten more of it than he wished. He placed it again on the floor beside his chair and blew it out a second time. Darkness came back at once.

Jarette was no longer at ease. He was unhappy with the room, with the body, and most of all with himself. “What is there to fear?” he thought. “This is foolish and shameful. I will not be such a fool.”

But courage does not come only because a man orders it to come. The more he told himself to be brave, the less brave he felt. He repeated again and again that the dead cannot hurt the living. Each repetition made the thought weaker.

He began to argue with himself almost angrily. He had no belief in ghosts, he said. He did not believe that the dead lived on in any form that could walk about at night. He knew that such fears came from old stories and old human ignorance.

Yet knowledge did not free him. His body did not obey his opinions. His heart beat too fast, his skin felt cold, and his hands closed hard on the arms of the chair. The dead body remained close to him in the dark.

At last his self-command broke into words. He cried out that he had no superstition in him, no belief in spirits, and no reason to fear a dead man. Was he to lose his money, his honor, his self-respect, and perhaps his mind because ancient people had once believed that the dead walked at night?

He stopped before the thought was finished. Behind him, in the darkness, he heard a sound. It was light and soft, but it was clear. Footsteps were crossing the room.

They came slowly and regularly. One step followed another. Each step was nearer than the last.

Part 4 — Mancher's Return

Just before daybreak, Dr. Helberson and Harper were riding slowly through the streets of North Beach. They sat in the doctor's carriage, passing the same streets more than once. The air before dawn felt cold and empty. Neither man seemed eager to reach the house.

Helberson asked if Harper still believed in his friend's courage. Harper said he was sure that Jarette had won the wager. Helberson answered in a low, serious voice that he hoped so. There was no laughter in him now.

For a little while, they rode in silence. Then Helberson said that he did not feel comfortable about the whole matter. Jarette had angered him by speaking too carelessly about the test, and by suggesting that the corpse should be that of a doctor. If anything had gone wrong, Helberson said, they would be ruined, and perhaps they would deserve it.

Harper tried to calm him. He said nothing serious could happen. If Jarette became too frightened, Mancher only had to sit up and explain the trick. That, Harper said, was the advantage of using a living man instead of a real dead body.

This shows the truth clearly. Dr. Mancher had kept his promise. He was the man lying under the sheet. He had been the "corpse" in the room with Jarette.

Helberson did not answer for a long time. The carriage moved slowly along the quiet street. At last he said that he hoped Mancher had been careful if he had needed to rise from the table. A mistake at such a moment might make the matter worse instead of better.

Harper looked at his watch as they passed a gas lamp. It was nearly four o'clock. A few moments later, they left the carriage and walked quickly toward the empty house. Their steps sounded sharp in the early morning quiet.

Before they reached the house, a man came running toward them. He stopped suddenly and asked where he could find a doctor. Helberson asked what had happened. The man only said, "Go and see for yourself," and ran on.

The two men hurried forward. When they reached the house, they found people

entering in great excitement. Windows in nearby houses were open, and heads looked out into the street. Everyone seemed to be asking questions, but no one seemed to be listening to any answer.

A street lamp stood across from the door and threw a weak yellow light on the scene. Harper stopped before entering and caught Helberson by the arm. He was badly frightened now. He said the game had gone against them and that they should not go in.

Helberson was calmer. “I am a doctor,” he said. “Someone may need one.” Then he went up the steps, and Harper followed him.

The front door stood open. The hall inside was full of men talking at once. Some had tried to go upstairs but had been stopped near the top. Others stood below, waiting, staring, and pushing one another without any clear purpose.

Suddenly there was a great noise on the upper landing. A man burst out of a room and fought his way down the stairs. People tried to stop him, but he was too strong. He pushed them aside, struck them, threw them back, and stepped over those who fell.

His clothes were in disorder, and he had no hat. His eyes were wild and restless. His face was smooth and bloodless. Most terrible of all, his hair had turned white.

As the crowd at the foot of the stairs moved away from him, Harper sprang forward. “Jarette! Jarette!” he cried. But Helberson seized Harper by the collar and pulled him back.

The man looked into their faces without seeming to see them. Then he rushed through the open door, down the steps, and into the street. A strong policeman followed him a moment later. From the windows, women and children screamed and pointed the way he had gone.

The stairway was now partly clear because most of the crowd had rushed outside to watch the chase. Helberson went up to the landing, and Harper followed. At the door of the upper room, an officer tried to stop them. Helberson said they were doctors, and the officer let them pass.

The room was full of men standing around the table. A policeman held a bright lantern at the foot of the table. Its beam fell on the body lying there, while much

of the room remained dark. The lower part of the body was covered with a sheet.

Helberson and Harper pushed forward and looked over the shoulders of the men in front. The face on the table was horrible. The eyes were partly open and turned upward. The jaw had fallen, and foam marked the lips, chin, and cheeks.

Another doctor was already there. He bent over the body and placed his hand under the shirt. Then he put two fingers into the open mouth. After a moment, he said that the man had been dead for about six hours and that the coroner must be called.

Then the officer ordered everyone out of the room. He moved the lantern from face to face, and the sudden light frightened and confused the crowd. Men pushed toward the door in panic. Helberson and Harper were caught in the rush and were carried down the stairs with the others.

When they were outside and clear of the crowd, Harper spoke in a shaking voice. He said he had known Jarette would kill Mancher. Helberson answered without much feeling, as if his mind were already far away.

They walked on in silence through the gray light of morning. The city was beginning to wake. Milk wagons were moving, bakers would soon appear, and newspaper boys were already out. Ordinary life was returning, but the two men no longer belonged easily to it.

After a while, Helberson said that they had been getting too much morning air lately. It was not healthy, he said. They needed a change. He suggested a trip to Europe.

Harper asked when. Helberson answered that four o'clock that afternoon would be soon enough. Harper said he would meet him at the boat. That was the end of their life in San Francisco.

Seven years later, the two men sat on a bench in Madison Square in New York. They were older now and were talking together in a familiar way. Another man had been watching them for some time without being noticed. At last he came closer and lifted his hat politely.

His hair was as white as frost. He said, "Excuse me, gentlemen. When you kill a man by coming to life, the best thing is to change clothes with him and escape

as soon as possible."

Helberson and Harper looked at each other. At first they seemed amused. Helberson looked kindly at the stranger and began to agree with him as if the words were only a joke. Then he stopped, rose to his feet, and turned white.

Harper asked who the man was. The stranger came closer and bent toward them. In a low voice, he said that he sometimes called himself Jarette. But for old friendship, he did not mind telling them that he was Dr. William Mancher.

Harper sprang up. Helberson also knew him then. The man smiled in a vague way, as if even he was not fully sure of the truth. Then he began to hum a tune and seemed almost to forget that the two men were there.

Helberson asked him to tell what had happened that night. Mancher said it was strange that he had forgotten to tell them, because he told the story so often. He had heard Jarette talking to himself and knew that Jarette was badly frightened. So he could not resist the chance to "come to life" and have some fun.

He said he had not thought Jarette would take the matter so seriously. Afterward, it had been hard work to change clothes with him and change places with him. Then Mancher's voice suddenly became fierce. He said that they had not let him out.

The two men stepped back in alarm. Helberson said weakly that they had had nothing to do with it. Mancher laughed and called them by twisted names, "Hell-born" and "Sharper." Helberson corrected him and said that they were no longer doctors. They were gamblers now.

Mancher seemed to accept this. He said it was a very good profession and hoped Harper had honestly paid over Jarette's money. Then he began to move away, still speaking in a thoughtful voice. He said that he himself stayed with the old profession.

"I am the High Supreme Medical Officer of the Bloomingdale Asylum," he said. "It is my duty to cure the superintendent."