# AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE

by Ambrose Bierce



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CLASSIC SHORT STORY
ENGLISH READING PRACTICE

ENGLISH SHORT STORIES FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS

LEVEL C1

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# About the Author

## Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914)

Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914?) was an American writer, journalist, and Civil War veteran, best known for his dark humour, sharp criticism of society, and unforgettable short stories. He was born on June 24, 1842, in Meigs County, Ohio, United States.

Bierce served in the Union Army during the American Civil War. His experiences on the battlefield had a profound influence on his writing. He witnessed the violence, suffering, and psychological effects of war, which later became important themes in many of his storieas.

After the war, Bierce began a successful career as a journalist and writer. He became famous for his direct writing style, dark irony, and ability to create suspense. His stories often explore death, fear, human psychology, war, and the unpredictable nature of life.

One of his most celebrated works is *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, first published in 1890. The story is widely admired for its unusual structure, psychological depth, and surprising ending. It demonstrates Bierce's remarkable ability to challenge readers' understanding of reality and time.

Other notable works include *Chickamauga*, *The Boarded Window*, and *The Devil's Dictionary*, a collection of satirical definitions that reveals his sharp wit and critical view of human nature.

In 1913, Bierce travelled to Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. He disappeared there, and the exact circumstances of his death remain unknown. He is believed to have died around 1914.

Today, Ambrose Bierce is remembered as an important American short-story writer whose works continue to interest readers with their suspense, psychological insight, and exploration of the darker sides of human nature.

# About the Story

*An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* is a famous short story by American writer Ambrose Bierce. It was first published in 1890 in the literary magazine *The San Francisco Examiner*. The story is set during the American Civil War (1861–1865) and explores the relationship between reality, imagination, time, and death.

Bierce's own experiences as a Union soldier during the Civil War influenced his portrayal of military life, violence, and the psychological effects of war. The story is widely recognized for its unusual narrative structure, psychological depth, and unexpected ending.

## Plot Summary

The story follows Peyton Farquhar, an Alabama planter and supporter of the Confederacy, who is about to be hanged by Union soldiers for interfering with a railroad bridge.

As he stands on the bridge with a rope around his neck, Farquhar becomes increasingly aware of his surroundings. His attention turns to the water below, and he imagines a possible escape.

The story then moves back in time to explain how he came to be in this situation. A Federal scout, disguised as a Confederate soldier, visits Farquhar's home and tells him about the Union forces repairing Owl Creek Bridge. After learning that the wooden supports are surrounded by dry driftwood, Farquhar considers destroying the bridge. However, the soldier is actually a Union scout who has deceived him.

The narrative returns to the execution. As Farquhar falls from the bridge, the rope appears to break, allowing him to escape into the creek. He experiences a series of extraordinary events as he struggles against the current, avoids gunfire, and makes his way through the forest.

After travelling for many hours, he finally reaches what appears to be his home. He sees his wife waiting for him and rushes towards her. Just as they are about to embrace, he feels a sudden, powerful blow.

The final sentence reveals the truth: Farquhar has died, and his body is hanging beneath the Owl Creek Bridge. His apparent escape and journey home have taken place in his imagination during the final moments of his life.

## Main Characters

Peyton Farquhar – The central character of the story. He is an Alabama planter and Confederate supporter who is sentenced to death for attempting to interfere with a Union military bridge.

Mrs. Farquhar – Peyton's wife. She appears briefly in the story and represents his family, home, and emotional attachment to life.

The Federal Scout – A Union soldier disguised as a Confederate soldier. He deceives Farquhar by encouraging him to consider destroying Owl Creek Bridge.

The Union Soldiers – The soldiers responsible for carrying out Farquhar's execution. Their calm and disciplined behaviour contrasts with the emotional intensity of his imagined escape.

## Main Themes

### Reality and Illusion

One of the central themes is the difference between reality and imagination. Farquhar's mind creates an elaborate escape during the final moments of his life, making the reader question what is real.

### Time and Human Perception

Bierce explores how time can appear to change under extreme psychological pressure. A brief moment seems to contain an entire journey filled with detailed experiences.

### War and Death

The story presents the cruelty and violence of war through the execution of a civilian. It also examines the fragility of human life in wartime.

### Survival and the Instinct to Live

Farquhar's imagined struggle reflects the powerful human desire to survive, even when death is unavoidable.

### Deception and Consequences

The Federal scout's disguise and misleading information lead Farquhar into a fatal situation. His actions demonstrate the dangerous consequences of trusting appearances.

## Literary Elements and Techniques

### Flashback

The second section moves backwards in time to explain the events that led to Farquhar's execution. This technique provides important background information.

### Stream of Consciousness

The narrative presents Farquhar's thoughts, sensations, and perceptions as he experiences the moments surrounding his execution.

### Irony

Farquhar imagines that he has escaped death and returned to his family. The final revelation shows that his escape was never real.

### Suspense

Bierce gradually reveals information and delays the final explanation, keeping readers uncertain about Farquhar's fate.

Imagery and Sensory Details

The descriptions of water, light, sound, and nature make Farquhar's imagined escape seem vivid and realistic.

Significance of the Title

The title *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* sounds simple and almost ordinary. However, the word "occurrence" refers to an extraordinary psychological experience surrounding a man's execution. The bridge becomes the central location where reality, imagination, life, and death meet.

Why Is This Story Important?

*An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* is considered an important work of American short fiction because of its innovative narrative structure and psychological complexity. It challenges readers to reconsider their understanding of time, perception, and reality.

For English learners, the original story offers an opportunity to explore advanced vocabulary, literary language, complex sentence structures, and sophisticated narrative techniques. It is particularly suitable for advanced readers at the C1 level.

# An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

by Ambrose Bierce

## I

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

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

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

The preparations being complete, the two private soldiers stepped aside and each drew away the plank upon which he had been standing. The sergeant turned to the captain, saluted and placed himself immediately behind that officer, who in turn moved apart one pace. These movements left the condemned man and the sergeant standing on the two ends of the same plank, which spanned three of the cross-ties of the bridge. The end upon which the civilian

stood almost, but not quite, reached a fourth. This plank had been held in place by the weight of the captain; it was now held by that of the sergeant. At a signal from the former the latter would step aside, the plank would tilt and the condemned man go down between two ties. The arrangement commended itself to his judgement as simple and effective. His face had not been covered nor his eyes bandaged. He looked a moment at his "unsteadfast footing," then let his gaze wander to the swirling water of the stream racing madly beneath his feet. A piece of dancing driftwood caught his attention and his eyes followed it down the current. How slowly it appeared to move! What a sluggish stream!

He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children. The water, touched to gold by the early sun, the brooding mists under the banks at some distance down the stream, the fort, the soldiers, the piece of drift—all had distracted him. And now he became conscious of a new disturbance. Striking through the thought of his dear ones was sound which he could neither ignore nor understand, a sharp, distinct, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith's hammer upon the anvil; it had the same ringing quality. He wondered what it was, and whether immeasurably distant or near by— it seemed both. Its recurrence was regular, but as slow as the tolling of a death knell. He awaited each new stroke with impatience and—he knew not why—apprehension. The intervals of silence grew progressively longer; the delays became maddening. With their greater infrequency the sounds increased in strength and sharpness. They hurt his ear like the thrust of a knife; he feared he would shriek. What he heard was the ticking of his watch.

He unclosed his eyes and saw again the water below him. "If I could free my hands," he thought, "I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream. By diving I could evade the bullets and, swimming vigorously, reach the bank, take to the woods and get away home. My home, thank God, is as yet outside their lines; my wife and little ones are still beyond the invader's farthest advance."

As these thoughts, which have here to be set down in words, were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it the captain nodded to the sergeant. The sergeant stepped aside.

## II

Peyton Farquhar was a well to do planter, of an old and highly respected Alabama family. Being a slave owner and like other slave owners a politician, he was naturally an original secessionist and ardently devoted to the Southern cause. Circumstances of an imperious nature, which it is unnecessary to relate here, had prevented him from taking service with that gallant army which had fought the disastrous campaigns ending with the fall of Corinth, and he chafed under the inglorious restraint, longing for the release of his energies, the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction. That opportunity, he felt, would come, as it comes to all in wartime. Meanwhile he did what he could. No service was too humble for him to perform in the aid of the South, no adventure too perilous for him to undertake if consistent with the character of a civilian who was at heart a soldier, and who in good faith and without too much qualification assented to at least a part of the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war.

One evening while Farquhar and his wife were sitting on a rustic bench near the entrance to his grounds, a gray-clad soldier rode up to the gate and asked for a drink of water. Mrs. Farquhar was only too happy to serve him with her own white hands. While she was fetching

the water her husband approached the dusty horseman and inquired eagerly for news from the front.

"The Yanks are repairing the railroads," said the man, "and are getting ready for another advance. They have reached the Owl Creek bridge, put it in order and built a stockade on the north bank. The commandant has issued an order, which is posted everywhere, declaring that any civilian caught interfering with the railroad, its bridges, tunnels, or trains will be summarily hanged. I saw the order."

"How far is it to the Owl Creek bridge?" Farquhar asked.

"About thirty miles."

"Is there no force on this side of the creek?"

"Only a picket post half a mile out, on the railroad, and a single sentinel at this end of the bridge."

"Suppose a man—a civilian and student of hanging—should elude the picket post and perhaps get the better of the sentinel," said Farquhar, smiling, "what could he accomplish?"

The soldier reflected. "I was there a month ago," he replied. "I observed that the flood of last winter had lodged a great quantity of driftwood against the wooden pier at this end of the bridge. It is now dry and would burn like tinder."

The lady had now brought the water, which the soldier drank. He thanked her ceremoniously, bowed to her husband and rode away. An hour later, after nightfall, he repassed the plantation, going northward in the direction from which he had come. He was a Federal scout.

## III

As Peyton Farquhar fell straight downward through the bridge he lost consciousness and was as one already dead. From this state he was awakened—ages later, it seemed to him—by the pain of a sharp pressure upon his throat, followed by a sense of suffocation. Keen, poignant agonies seemed to shoot from his neck downward through every fiber of his body and limbs. These pains appeared to flash along well defined lines of ramification and to beat with an inconceivably rapid periodicity. They seemed like streams of pulsating fire heating him to an intolerable temperature. As to his head, he was conscious of nothing but a feeling of fullness—of congestion. These sensations were unaccompanied by thought. The intellectual part of his nature was already effaced; he had power only to feel, and feeling was torment. He was conscious of motion. Encompassed in a luminous cloud, of which he was now merely the fiery heart, without material substance, he swung through unthinkable arcs of oscillation, like a vast pendulum. Then all at once, with terrible suddenness, the light about him shot upward with the noise of a loud splash; a frightful roaring was in his ears, and all was cold and dark. The power of thought was restored; he knew that the rope had broken and he had fallen into the stream. There was no additional strangulation; the noose about his neck was already suffocating him and kept the water from his lungs. To die of hanging at the bottom of a river!—the idea seemed to him ludicrous. He opened his eyes in the darkness and saw above him a gleam of light, but how distant, how inaccessible! He was still sinking, for the light became fainter and fainter until it was a mere glimmer. Then it began to grow and brighten, and he knew that he was rising toward the surface—knew it with reluctance, for he was now very comfortable. "To be hanged and drowned," he thought, "that is not so bad; but I do not wish to be shot. No; I will not be shot; that is not fair."

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

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

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

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

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

"Company!… Attention!… Shoulder arms!… Ready!… Aim!… Fire!"

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

As he rose to the surface, gasping for breath, he saw that he had been a long time under water; he was perceptibly farther downstream—nearer to safety. The soldiers had almost finished reloading; the metal ramrods flashed all at once in the sunshine as they were drawn from the barrels, turned in the air, and thrust into their sockets. The two sentinels fired again, independently and ineffectually.

The hunted man saw all this over his shoulder; he was now swimming vigorously with the current. His brain was as energetic as his arms and legs; he thought with the rapidity of lightning:

"The officer," he reasoned, "will not make that martinet's error a second time. It is as easy to dodge a volley as a single shot. He has probably already given the command to fire at will. God help me, I cannot dodge them all!"

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

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

Suddenly he felt himself whirled round and round—spinning like a top. The water, the banks, the forests, the now distant bridge, fort and men, all were commingled and blurred. Objects were represented by their colors only; circular horizontal streaks of color—that was all he saw. He had been caught in a vortex and was being whirled on with a velocity of advance and gyration that made him giddy and sick. In few moments he was flung upon the gravel at the foot of the left bank of the stream—the southern bank—and behind a projecting point which concealed him from his enemies. The sudden arrest of his motion, the abrasion of one of his hands on the gravel, restored him, and he wept with delight. He dug his fingers into the sand, threw it over himself in handfuls and audibly blessed it. It looked like diamonds, rubies, emeralds; he could think of nothing beautiful which it did not resemble. The trees upon the bank were giant garden plants; he noted a definite order in their arrangement, inhaled the fragrance of their blooms. A strange roseate light shone through the spaces among their trunks and the wind made in their branches the music of AEolian harps. He had not wish to perfect his escape—he was content to remain in that enchanting spot until retaken.

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

All that day he traveled, laying his course by the rounding sun. The forest seemed interminable; nowhere did he discover a break in it, not even a woodman's road. He had not known that he lived in so wild a region. There was something uncanny in the revelation.

By nightfall he was fatigued, footsore, famished. The thought of his wife and children urged him on. At last he found a road which led him in what he knew to be the right direction. It was as wide and straight as a city street, yet it seemed untraveled. No fields bordered it, no dwelling anywhere. Not so much as the barking of a dog suggested human habitation. The black bodies of the trees formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating on the horizon in a point, like a diagram in a lesson in perspective. Overhead, as he looked up through this rift in the wood, shone great golden stars looking unfamiliar and grouped in strange constellations. He was sure they were arranged in some order which had a secret and malign significance. The wood on either side was full of singular noises, among which—once, twice, and again—he distinctly heard whispers in an unknown tongue.

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

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

Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge.

THE END

## VOCABULARY LIST

1. **Stout** /staʊt/ — strong and thick; solidly built.
   Example: “It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head.”

2. **Slack** /slæk/ — loose; not pulled tight.
   Example: “and the slack fell to the level of his knees.”

3. **Stockade** /stɒˈkeɪd/ — a defensive barrier made of upright wooden posts.
   Example: “with a stockade of vertical tree trunks”

4. **Embrasure** /ɪmˈbreɪʒə(r)/ — an opening in a wall through which weapons can be fired.
   Example: “with a single embrasure through which protruded the muzzle of a brass cannon”

5. **Sentinel** /ˈsentɪnəl/ — a soldier whose duty is to guard a place or watch for danger.
   Example: “A sentinel at each end of the bridge stood with his rifle in the position known as ‘support’”

6. **Deference** /ˈdefərəns/ — respectful behaviour towards someone because of their position or authority.
   Example: “In the code of military etiquette silence and fixity are forms of deference.”

7. **Condemned** /kənˈdemd/ — officially sentenced to a punishment, especially death.
   Example: “the condemned man and the sergeant standing on the two ends of the same plank”

8. **Swirling** /ˈswɜːlɪŋ/ — moving in a circular or twisting motion.
   Example: “to the swirling water of the stream racing madly beneath his feet.”

9. **Apprehension** /ˌæprɪˈhenʃən/ — anxiety or fear about something that may happen.
   Example: “he knew not why—apprehension.”

10. **Imperious** /ɪmˈpɪəriəs/ — expecting obedience and behaving in an authoritative or demanding way.
    Example: “Circumstances of an imperious nature”

11. **Ardently** /ˈɑːdəntli/ — with strong feelings, enthusiasm, or passion.
    Example: “and ardently devoted to the Southern cause.”

12. **Inglorious** /ɪnˈglɔːriəs/ — bringing no honour or glory; lacking distinction.
    Example: “under the inglorious restraint”

13. **Perilous** /ˈperələs/ — extremely dangerous or risky.
    Example: “no adventure too perilous for him to undertake”

14. **Lodged** /lɒdʒd/ — became firmly stuck or fixed in a particular place.
    Example: “the flood of last winter had lodged a great quantity of driftwood against the wooden pier at this end of the bridge.”

15. **Tinder** /ˈtɪndə(r)/ — dry material that catches fire easily.
    Example: “It is now dry and would burn like tinder.”

16. **Poignant** /ˈpɔɪnjənt/ — causing strong feelings of sadness, pain, or emotion.
    Example: “Keen, poignant agonies seemed to shoot from his neck downward through every fiber of his body and limbs.”

17. **Suffocation** /ˌsʌfəˈkeɪʃən/ — the state of being unable to breathe.
    Example: “followed by a sense of suffocation.”

18. **Ramification** /ˌræmɪfɪˈkeɪʃən/ — a branch or division extending from a main structure.
    Example: “These pains appeared to flash along well defined lines of ramification”

19. **Preternaturally** /ˌpriːtəˈnætʃərəli/ — in a way that is beyond what is normal or natural.
    Example: “They were, indeed, preternaturally keen and alert.”

20. **Ineffectually** /ˌɪnɪˈfektʃuəli/ — without producing the intended result; unsuccessfully.
    Example: “The two sentinels fired again, independently and ineffectually.”

# READING COMPREHENSION

Instructions: Answer the following questions based on the story.

1. Why was Peyton Farquhar sentenced to death by the Union soldiers?

2. How does the author describe the atmosphere on the bridge before Farquhar's execution?

3. Why does Farquhar become unusually aware of the ticking of his watch?

4. What details suggest that Farquhar is deeply concerned about his wife and children?

5. How does Farquhar's social position and political background influence his character?

6. Why was Farquhar unable to serve in the Confederate Army despite his strong support for the Southern cause?

7. How did the disguised Federal scout manipulate Farquhar into considering an attack on the bridge?

8. Why did Farquhar believe that burning the driftwood could help the Confederate cause?

9. What happens to Farquhar immediately after the sergeant steps away from the plank?

10. How does Farquhar manage to free himself from the rope and escape into the water
11. What unusual sensory experiences does Farquhar experience after reaching the surface?

12. How do the Union soldiers attempt to prevent Farquhar from escaping?

13. Why does Farquhar believe that he can avoid being shot by the soldiers?

14. What role does the cannon play in Farquhar's imagined escape?

15. How does the description of nature change after Farquhar reaches the southern bank?

16. What details suggest that Farquhar's journey through the forest may not be entirely real?

17. How does the author create the impression that Farquhar has finally returned home?

18. What is the significance of Farquhar seeing his wife waiting for him at the gate?

19. How does the final sentence completely change the reader's understanding of the preceding events?

20. How does Bierce use the story's structure to explore the relationship between reality, imagination, time, and death?

## GRAMMAR EXERCISES

Instructions: Choose the one correct answer (A, B, C, or D).

**1.** By the time the execution preparations were complete, Farquhar _____ on the bridge for several minutes.

A) stood
B) has been standing
C) had been standing
D) will be standing

**2.** The Federal scout explained that the previous winter's flood _____ a large quantity of driftwood against the wooden pier.

A) had lodged
B) has lodging
C) was lodge
D) would lodging

**3.** If Farquhar _____ the scout's true identity, he would never have considered attacking the bridge.

A) knew
B) had known
C) has known
D) would know

**4.** Farquhar was eager _____ an opportunity to serve the Southern cause.

A) finding
B) found
C) to find
D) to finding

**5.** The Federal scout, _____ as a Confederate soldier, successfully deceived Farquhar.

A) disguise
B) disguising
C) disguised
D) was disguised

**6.** Not until the scout had left _____ that he had been deceived.

A) Farquhar realized
B) did Farquhar realize
C) Farquhar had realized
D) had Farquhar realize

**7.** After the captain stepped away, the plank _____ in place by the sergeant's weight.

A) was held
B) holding
C) has held
D) were held

**8.** No sooner _____ the sergeant stepped aside than Farquhar began to fall.

A) did
B) has
C) had
D) was

**9.** Farquhar considered _____ into the stream as a possible means of escape.

A) to jump
B) jumping
C) jumped
D) jump

**10.** _____ his hands, Farquhar immediately struggled to remove the noose.

A) Having freed
B) Have freed
C) To freeing
D) Has freed

**11.** Despite _____ at repeatedly by the soldiers, Farquhar continued swimming.

A) shoot
B) shooting
C) being shot
D) to be shooting

**12.** The pain was so intense that Farquhar could barely _____ his eyes open.

A) kept
B) keeping
C) keep
D) to keep

**13.** The more desperately Farquhar struggled, _____ determined he became to survive.

A) most
B) the more
C) more
D) the most

**14.** The soldiers fired repeatedly, but their shots were _____ in stopping Farquhar's escape.

A) ineffective
B) ineffectively
C) ineffectiveness
D) ineffectuality

**15.** Had Farquhar recognized the Federal scout, he _____ the information about the bridge.

A) would not trust
B) will not have trusted
C) would not have trusted
D) had not trusted

**16.** It was only in the final sentence _____ the truth about Farquhar's fate.

A) readers discovered
B) did readers discover
C) that readers discovered
D) readers had discover

**17.** The rope was so tightly fastened that Farquhar was unable _____ his hands immediately.

A) freeing
B) to free
C) freed
D) to freeing

**18.** The road appeared _____ for a long time, with no signs of human habitation.

A) abandon
B) abandoning
C) to have been abandoned
D) to abandon

**19.** The vivid descriptions of sounds and sensations _____ the illusion that Farquhar had escaped.

A) strengthened
B) strengthening
C) to strengthening
D) has strengthen

**20.** At the moment Farquhar imagined reaching his home, his body _____ beneath the bridge.

A) hangs
B) has hung

C) was hanging
D) will hang

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## ANSWER KEY

1-C, 2-A, 3-B, 4-C, 5-C, 6-B, 7-A, 8-C, 9-B, 10-A, 11-C, 12-C, 13-B, 14-A, 15-C, 16-C, 17-B, 18-C, 19-A, 20-C