

## The Coup de Grace – part 1

The fighting had been hard and continuous. The very taste of battle was in the air. All was now over; it remained only to help the **wounded** and bury the dead. As far as one could see through the forests lay **wrecks** of men and horses. Among them moved the **stretcher-bearers**, gathering and carrying away the few who showed signs of life. Most of the wounded had died of neglect. It is an army regulation that the wounded must wait; the best way to care for them is to win the battle. It must be confessed that victory is a distinct advantage to a man requiring attention, but many do not live to avail themselves of it.

The dead were collected in groups of a dozen or a score and laid side by side in rows while the trenches were dug to receive them. At some little distance from the spot where one of the burial parties had established its "bivouac of the dead," a man in the uniform of a Federal officer stood leaning against a tree. Doubtless this officer was lost. After resting himself a moment he would presumably follow one of the retiring burial squads. When all were gone he walked straight away into the forest toward the red west. The dead on his right and on his left were unregarded as he passed. An occasional low **moan** from some **wretch** was ignored. What, indeed, could the officer have done, being no **surgeon** and having no water? At the head of a shallow ravine, he stopped above one which lay at a slight remove from the others, near a clump of small trees. He looked at it narrowly. It seemed to **stir**. He **stooped** and **laid** his hand upon its face. It screamed. The officer was Captain Downing Madwell, of a Massachusetts regiment of infantry, a daring and intelligent soldier, an honorable man.

In the regiment were two brothers named Halcrow--Caffal and Creede Halcrow. Caffal Halcrow was a sergeant in Captain Madwell's company, and these two men, the sergeant and the captain, were devoted friends. They had, indeed, grown up together from childhood. A habit of the heart is not easily broken off. Caffal Halcrow had nothing military in his taste nor disposition, but the thought of separation from his friend was disagreeable; he enlisted in the company in which Madwell was second-lieutenant. Each had taken two steps upward in **rank**, but between the highest noncommissioned and the lowest commissioned officer the **gulf** is **deep** and wide and the old relation was maintained with difficulty and a difference.

Creede Halcrow, the brother of Caffal, was the major of the regiment--a cynical man, between whom and Captain Madwell there was a natural antipathy which circumstances had nourished and strengthened to an active animosity. If not for Caffal these two patriots would doubtless have loved to **deprive** their country of each other's services.

At the opening of the battle that morning the regiment was performing outpost duty a mile away from the main army. It was attacked and nearly surrounded in the forest, but stubbornly held its ground. During a moment of peace in the fighting, Major Halcrow came to Captain Madwell. The two exchanged formal salutes, and the major said: "Captain, the colonel directs that you push your company to the head of this ravine and hold your place there until recalled. I need hardly apprise you of the dangerous character of the movement, but if you wish, you can, I suppose, turn over the command to your first-lieutenant."

To this deadly insult Captain Madwell coolly replied:

"Sir, I invite you to accompany the movement. A mounted officer would be a **conspicuous** mark, and I have long held the opinion that it would be better if you were dead."

A half-hour later Captain Madwell's company was driven from its position at the head of the ravine, with a loss of one-third its number. Among the fallen was Sergeant Halcrow. The regiment was soon afterward forced back to the main line, and at the close of the battle was miles away. The captain was now standing at the side of his subordinate and friend.

Adapted from Ambroise Bierce, 1892

**wounded** : *blesé* - **wrecks** : *épaves, naufragés* – *ici des montagnes de* - **stretcher-bearers** : *brancardier*  
**moan**: *gémissement* - **wretch** : *malheureux* - **surgeon**: *chirurgien*  
**stir** : *bouger légèrement* – **stooped** : *se pencher* - **laid** : *ici posé*–  
**rank**: *rang* – **gulf** : *gouffre* – **deep** : *profond*  
**deprive**: *priver* – **conspicuous** : *visible*