

## 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.

Sergeant Halcrow was mortally hurt. The only visible wound was a wide, ragged opening in the abdomen. In all his experience Captain Madwell had not seen a wound like this. He knelt and made a closer examination. The man who had suffered these monstrous mutilations was alive. At intervals he moved his **limbs**; he moaned at every breath. He stared blankly into the face of his friend and if touched screamed. Articulate speech was beyond his power; it was impossible to know if he were sensible to anything but pain. The expression of his face was an **appeal**; his eyes were full of prayer. For what?

There was no misreading that look; the captain had too frequently seen it in eyes of those whose lips had still the

power to formulate it by an entreaty for death, for the blessed release, the rite of uttermost compassion, the coup de grâce.

Captain Madwell spoke the name of his friend. He repeated it over and over without effect until emotion choked his utterance. His tears plashed upon the livid face beneath his own and blinded himself. He saw nothing but a blurred and moving object, but the moans were more distinct than ever, interrupted at briefer intervals by sharper shrieks. He turned away, struck his hand upon his forehead, and strode from the spot. A horse, its **foreleg splintered** by a cannon-shot, lifted its head sidewise from the ground and **neighed** piteously.

Madwell stepped forward, drew his revolver and shot the poor beast between his eyes, narrowly observing its death-struggle, which, contrary to his expectation, was violent and long; but at last it lay still. The tense muscles of its lips, which had uncovered the teeth in a horrible grin, relaxed; the sharp, cleancut profile took on a look of profound peace and rest.

Night was coming and there were miles of haunted forest between Captain Madwell and camp. Yet he stood there at the side of the dead animal, apparently lost to all sense of his surroundings. His eyes were bent upon the earth at his feet; his left hand hung loosely at his side, his right still held the pistol. Presently he lifted his face, turned it toward his dying friend and walked rapidly back to his side. He knelt upon one knee, cocked the weapon, placed the **muzzle** against the man's forehead, and turning away his eyes pulled the trigger. There was no report. He had used his last **cartridge** for the horse.

The sufferer moaned and his lips moved convulsively.

Captain Madwell rose to his feet and drew his sword from the scabbard. He passed the fingers of his left hand along the edge from **hilt** to point. He held it out straight before him, as if to test his nerves. There was no visible tremor of the blade; it was steady and true. He stooped and with his left hand tore away the dying man's shirt, rose and placed the point of the sword just over the heart. This time he did not withdraw his eyes. Grasping the hilt with both hands, he thrust downward with all his strength and weight. The blade sank into the man's body--through his body into the earth; Captain Madwell came near falling forward upon his work. The dying man drew up his knees and at the same time threw his right arm across his breast and grasped the steel so tightly that the knuckles of the hand visibly whitened. By a violent but vain effort to withdraw the **blade** the wound was enlarged; a rill of blood escaped, running sinuously down into the deranged clothing. At that moment three men stepped silently forward from behind the clump of young trees which had **concealed** their approach. Two were hospital attendants and carried a **stretcher**.

The third was Major Creede Halcrow.

Adapted from Ambrose 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*

**limb** : *membre du corps* – **appeal** : *appel*

**foreleg** : *jambe de devant* – **splintered** : *fendue* - **neighed**: *hennir*

**muzzle** : *canon* – **cartridge** : *cartouche*

**hilt** : *garde de l'épée* **blade**: *lame*

**concealed** : *cacher* – **stretcher**: *brancard*