

## The Coup de Grace – part 2

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 Ambroise Bierce, Adapted from Ambroise Bierce, 1892

**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*