



## An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

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The anonymous protagonist stands on a railroad bridge, awaiting execution. The preparations are meticulously described. As he awaits death, his thoughts carry him back in time.

The man, we learn, is Peyton Farquhar, a well-to-do Southern planter. A civilian, he wanted to do something to help the Southern cause. A stranger passing through his property stops for water and mentions that the Owl Creek Bridge is crucial to the advancing Northern troops. The reader understands that Farquhar is being hanged because he attempted to destroy the bridge.

He is hanged; the sensations of the hanging are told in precise detail. He seems to survive the hanging, a freak accident sending him into the river below where he manages to escape the soldiers' bullets, as well. He seems to find his way home again after the ordeal on the bridge and in the river. But, at the end, we discover that he is dead, that he never actually escaped from the hanging. Everything so carefully described occurred only in his mind, in the split second before he ceased to live.

Bierce was the master of closely observed, meticulously related detail. The power of the tale derives from this straightforward technique. Even the understated title helps to seduce the reader into a false sense of security. The photographic description of the scenes and locations builds up a basis of naturalistic realism that is in direct contrast to the dramatic conclusion of the tale.

The ironic tale, influenced by the brothers Goncourt and Gustave Flaubert, was a particularly apt vehicle both for Bierce's technical skill and for his bleak view of life.

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