

MACMILLAN READERS

PRE-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

AMBROSE BIERCE

Owl Creek Bridge
and Other Stories

Retold by Stephen Colbourn



MACMILLAN

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OWL CREEK BRIDGE

A man stood on the edge of a railroad bridge in Alabama. His feet were on one end of a plank. Standing on the other end of this long flat piece of wood were two soldiers. An officer stood a few yards away from the soldiers and watched what was happening.

The man looked down at the Owl Creek River that flowed twenty feet below him. One end of a long rope was tied to the railroad bridge. The other end of the rope was tied around the man's neck. His hands were tied behind his back with a short cord.

The man turned and looked around him. A railroad track came out of a forest and ran across the wooden bridge to a small fort. The fort stood on the northern bank of the river. Soldiers with rifles guarded¹³ each end of the bridge.

All the soldiers wore blue uniforms. They were soldiers of the Union Army and they were a long way from their homes in the north.

The man with the rope around his neck was not far from his home. His name was Peyton Farquhar. Peyton's home and his family were on the other side of the forest. But Peyton was not going to see them again. He was going to be hanged. When the two soldiers stepped off the plank, one end of it would lift up and Peyton would fall. When he fell, the rope would break his neck.

It was sunrise on a summer day. The sun was coming up above the trees in the east. Peyton looked down at the river below him again. The water was deep. Could he break the

cord and free his hands? Could he jump into the river, swim away, and escape?

Peyton was not a soldier, he was a rich landowner. He was thirty-five years old and he wore fine clothes. He was a well educated gentleman. He had a handsome face, long hair and a dark beard and mustache. Members of Peyton's family had lived in the southern state of Alabama for a hundred years. Slaves worked on his plantation. Now the Union Army—the Yankees—had invaded the Confederate state of Alabama. Peyton was not a soldier in the Confederate Army. But he wanted to defend his home against the invaders from the north.

A man had visited Peyton's house two days earlier and he had given Peyton an idea. The man had been wearing a gray uniform. He had told Peyton that he was a Confederate scout. The scout watched where and when Yankee regiments moved and how many men there were. Then he reported this information to his commanding officer.

"We tried to stop the Yankees moving further into this state. We destroyed the railroad track," the scout told Peyton. "But they repaired the track. A group of Yankees have now reached the bridge over Owl Creek. There are only a few hundred Yankee soldiers at the creek now, but soon there will be many more. They'll come on trains."

"How can we stop them?" asked Peyton.

"We need more of our own men," said the soldier. "More of our soldiers *are* coming. We can keep the Yankees at the river, but we need to delay them. We must keep them on the northern side of the bridge. Our men are not far away."

"I know Owl Creek Bridge," said Peyton. "In winter, the rain carries tree branches down the river. Branches are

trapped under the bridge now. I'll make a fire in the branches. They'll burn easily and so will the wooden bridge. I'll burn the bridge!"

"Be careful," said the scout. "If the Yankees catch you, they'll hang you."

So Peyton had gone to Owl Creek Bridge before sunrise. He had moved quietly along the southern bank of the river, but the bridge was well-guarded. Union soldiers had caught Peyton before he burned the bridge. And now he stood on the edge of the bridge with a rope around his neck.

Peyton looked down at a piece of wood that floated¹⁴ on the surface of the water. The river was deep and the water was moving very fast. He looked up at the sky. The bright sun had now risen above the trees. The short rope that was tied around Peyton's hands was too strong. He could not break the cord and he could not untie it. Peyton closed his eyes and thought about his wife and children. He did not want to die.

The Yankee officer shouted an order. The soldiers stepped off the wooden plank and Peyton fell toward the river. He felt a sharp pain in his neck. Then he heard a loud noise—SNAP! The rope had broken! Peyton fell into the river and went down and down into the deep dark water.

As soon as the ropes were wet, they became loose. The cord around Peyton's hands was no longer tight. He pulled the cord from his hands, and the rope around his neck fell away. Peyton was a strong swimmer. Now his hands were free and he could swim up through the water. He kicked his legs and went up toward the surface.

Peyton opened his eyes and saw daylight. He was glad to be alive. He breathed deeply. He looked at the sky and the trees as if he was seeing them for the first time. The colors of