

Owl Creek Bridge



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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 guarded 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 floated 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 the sky and the leaves on the trees were bright and strong.

Suddenly he heard loud voices. The soldiers were shouting as they looked down from the bridge. They were aiming their rifles down at the water.

Peyton heard the sound of a gun firing. Then he heard a bullet splash into the water and he saw a small cloud of smoke on the bridge. All the soldiers on the bridge were looking at him. They were aiming their rifles at him. One of the soldiers had fired his gun at Peyton. Peyton dove under the surface of the water and began to swim away from the bridge.

All the soldiers fired their rifles. It took them half a minute to reload their guns. But Peyton was not far enough away from the bridge. The soldiers could still shoot him before he reached a safer place! Peyton swam faster.

Suddenly he heard a loud whistling sound. The guards had fired the cannon that was in the small fort at the northern end of the bridge. There was a terrible noise as the cannon shell exploded. BOOM! Pieces of the shell crashed into the trees on the bank of the river. The cannon fired again. Another shell crashed in the river near Peyton's head. He began to swim quickly toward the southern bank of the river. The soldiers on the bridge fired their rifles again.

Peyton reached the river bank. The water was shallow here. His feet touched the soft sand at the bottom of the river and he stood up. He ran out of the water, toward the trees. As he ran, he held his head low. At any moment, a bullet might hit his back. Peyton ran into the forest and hid behind a large tree for a few minutes. Was he safe?

The Yankee soldiers could not see Peyton now, but he knew that he must go further into the forest. The cannon fired again and another shell crashed through the trees. The soldiers shouted as they ran across the bridge and came into the trees. Peyton ran deeper into the forest.

A strange light shone through the trees. Peyton felt as if he was in a dream. The leaves of the trees shone like bright green jewels. The smell of the flowers was strong and sweet.

It was warm in the forest and Peyton was tired. He wanted to rest. He wanted to stay here forever. But he had to escape from the Yankees. He had to go home.

Peyton walked on and on. Was there no end to the forest? Peyton had lived near this forest all his life, but he did not recognize any of it. He did not know where he was. This was a wild, strange place.

The sun rose higher in the sky. Peyton was hungry and tired, but he thought about his home and his family. He must go home-he must see his wife and children. He had to walk south, so he walked with the sun on his right side. He walked all day. He walked until the sun set and night fell.

At last he came to a path in the forest. The path was as straight as a city street. The tall trees on both sides of the path were like black walls. They went straight ahead like the lines on the plan of a building. When Peyton looked up, he saw bright stars in the dark sky. But he did not recognize them. They did not look like the stars that he remembered. He heard voices whispering in the forest. The trees were talking in a language that he did not understand.

Peyton was very hot and very tired. He was thirsty too, but he did not stop to find water. He walked along the straight path. He was not far from his home.

On and on he walked. He was half-asleep and half-awake.

The danger and excitement on the bridge had made Peyton extremely tired. His neck was very painful but he walked on. He knew that his house was near. It was at the end of the path. He was almost home. He was almost safe. Here the ground was soft. He no longer felt his feet moving on the soft grass. He forgot his hunger and thirst and pain.

Suddenly it is daylight and Peyton is standing in front of his own home. He must have traveled

all through the night. He pushes open his garden gate. His sweet wife is waiting for him on the steps of his house. She is smiling. How beautiful she is! Everything is bright and beautiful in the morning sunshine. Everything looks the same, but it is also brighter and clearer. Peyton has come home. But as he puts his arms around his wife he feels a sudden, terrible pain in his neck. A white light shines brightly. Then there is darkness and silence.

Peyton Farquhar was dead. His neck was broken. His body hung from the rope under Owl Creek Bridge.

- THE END -

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