

An Adaptation of
“A Horseman in the Sky”
By Ambrose Bierce

One sunny afternoon in the autumn of the year 1861, a soldier lay in a bush by the side of a road in Western Virginia. Except for the slightest movement, he might have been thought to be dead. Instead, he was asleep at his post.

The bush in which the criminal lay was in the angle of a road in mountainous terrain. Nearby was a large flat rock, overlooking the deep valley. The rock capped a high cliff. If a stone were dropped from its edge, it would have fallen downward one thousand feet to the tops of the pines.

The country was wooded everywhere except at the bottom of the valley to the northward, where there was a small natural meadow, through which flowed a stream.

No country is so wild and difficult for men to make a place of war. Hiding in the forest below lay five regiments of Union infantry. They had marched all the previous day and night, and were resting. At nightfall they would take to the road again, climb to the place where their unfaithful watchman now slept. Then they would descend the other slope of the ridge and fall upon the enemy at about midnight. Their hope was to surprise it, for the road led to the rear of it.

The sleeping soldier was a young Virginian named Carter Druse. He was the son of wealthy parents, and an only child. His home was only a few miles from where he now lay. One morning he had risen from the breakfast table and said, quietly but gravely: "Father, a Union regiment has arrived at Grafton. I am going to join it."

The father lifted his head, looked at the son a moment in silence, and replied: "Well, go, sir, and, whatever may occur, do what you think is your duty. You are a traitor to Virginia. Should we both live to the end of the war, we will speak further of the matter. Your mother, as the physician has informed you, is in a most critical condition. At best, she cannot live more than a few weeks."

So Carter Druse, bowing reverently to his father, left the home of his childhood to go soldiering. He proved himself a good soldier, and it was because of this that he was presently on duty at the outpost. But his fatigue had been great, and he had fallen asleep. What good or bad angel came in a dream to rouse him from his state of crime, who shall say? Some invisible messenger of fate whispered into the ear of his spirit. He quietly raised his forehead from his arm and looked between the bushes, closing his right hand about his rifle.

His first feeling was a artistic delight. On the cliff, motionless at the extreme edge of the rock and sharply outlined against the sky, was the figure of the man on a horse. The man looked like a Grecian god in the marble. His gray uniform harmonized with its background. A gun lay across the front of the saddle. The profile of the horse looked across the heights of air to the confronting cliffs beyond. The face of the rider, turned slightly away, showed only an outline of temple and beard. He was looking downward to the bottom of the valley.

For an instant Druse had a strange, half-defined feeling that he had slept to the end of the war and was looking upon a noble work of art that recalled the deeds of an heroic past. Then the horse made a slight movement backward. Broad awake and

keenly alive to the significance of the situation, Druse now brought the butt of his rifle against his cheek by cautiously pushing the barrel forward through the bushes. He looked through the sights and focused on a vital spot of the horseman's breast. At that instant the horseman turned his head and looked in the direction of his concealed enemy. He seemed to look into his very face, into his eyes, into his brave, compassionate heart.

Carter Druse grew pale. He shook in every limb and turned faint. His hand fell away from his weapon, and his head slowly dropped until his face rested on the leaves in which he lay. This courageous gentleman and hardy soldier was near fainting from intensity of emotion.

It was not for long. In another moment his face was raised from earth, his hands resumed their places on the rifle, and his forefinger sought the trigger. His mind, heart, and eyes were clear, conscience and reason sound. He could not hope to capture that enemy. To alarm him would but send him dashing to his camp with his fatal news. The duty of the soldier was plain: the man must be shot dead from ambush.

But there was one hope. Perhaps he had not seen Druse. If permitted, the man may turn and ride away in the direction whence he came. Druse turned his head and looked downward. He saw creeping across the green meadow a line of men and horses.

Druse withdrew his eyes from the valley and fixed them again upon the man and horse in the sky through the sights of his rifle. But this time his aim was at the horse. In his memory, as if they were a divine mandate, rang the words of his father at their parting: "Whatever may occur, do what you conceive to be your duty." He was calm now. Duty had conquered. He fired.

Far below in the distance, a Union officer glanced up and saw an astonishing sight—a man on horseback riding down into the valley through the air!

Straight upright sat the rider, in military fashion, with a firm seat in the saddle, a strong clutch upon the rein. From his bare head his long hair streamed upward, waving like a plume. The animal's body was as level as if every hoof-stroke encountered the resistant earth. Its motions were those of a wild gallop, but even as the officer looked they ceased, with all the legs thrown sharply forward as in the act of alighting from a leap.

Filled with amazement and terror, the officer was overcome by the intensity of his emotions. His legs failed him and he fell. Almost at the same instant he heard a crashing sound in the trees—a sound that died without an echo—and all was still.

The officer rose to his feet, trembling. Pulling himself together, he ran away from the cliff. There he expected to find the man, but he did not. So taken by the flying horseman, it did not occur to him that he would find the objects of his search at the foot of the cliff. A half-hour later he returned to camp.

This officer was a wise man. He said nothing of what he had seen. But when the commander asked him if he had learned anything of advantage to the expedition, he answered:

"Yes, sir. There is no road leading down into this valley from the southward."

The commander, knowing better, smiled.

After firing his shot, Private Carter Druse reloaded his rifle and resumed his watch. Ten minutes had hardly passed when a Union sergeant crept cautiously to him

on hands and knees. Druse neither turned his head nor looked at him, but lay without motion or sign of recognition.

"Did you fire?" the sergeant whispered.

"At what?"

"A horse. It was standing on yonder rock—pretty far out. You see it is no longer there. It went over the cliff."

The man's face was white, but he showed no other sign of emotion. Having answered, he turned away his eyes and said no more. The sergeant did not understand.

"See here, Druse," he said, after a moment's silence, "it's no use making a mystery. I order you to report. Was there anybody on the horse?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"My father."

The sergeant rose to his feet and walked away. "Good God!" he said.