

A Horseman in the Sky (By Ambrose Bierce)

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Our story today is called, "A Horseman in the Sky." It was written by Ambrose Bierce. Here is Roy Depew with the story.

Narrator: Carter Druse was born in Virginia. He loved his parents, his home and the south. But he loved his country, too. And in the autumn of eighteen sixty-one, when the United States was divided by a terrible civil war, Carter Druse, a southerner, decided to join the Union Army of the north.

He told his father about his decision one morning at breakfast.

The older man looked at his only son for a moment, too shocked to speak. Then he said, "As of this moment you are a traitor to the south. Please dont tell your mother about your decision. She is sick, and we both know she has only a few weeks to live."

Carters father paused, again looking deep into his sons eyes. "Carter," he said, "No matter what happens -- be sure you always do what you think is your duty."

Both Carter Druse and his father left the table that morning with broken hearts. And Carter soon left his home, and everyone he loved to wear the blue uniform of the Union soldier.

One sunny afternoon, a few weeks later, Carter Druse lay with his face in the dirt by the side of a road. He was on his stomach, his arms still holding his gun. Carter would not receive a medal for his actions. In fact, if his commanding officer were to see him, he would order Carter shot immediately.

For Carter was not dead or wounded. He was sleeping while on duty. Fortunately, no one could see him. He was hidden by some bushes, growing by the side of the road.

The road Carter Druse had been sent to guard was only a few miles from his fathers house.

It began in a forest, down in the valley, and climbed up the side of a huge rock. Anyone standing on the top of this high rock would be able to see down into the valley. And that person would feel very dizzy, looking down. If he dropped a stone from the edge of this cliff, it would fall for six hundred meters before disappearing into the forest in the valley below.

Giant cliffs, like the one Carter lay on, surrounded the valley.

Hidden in the valleys forest were five union regiments -- thousands of Carters fellow soldiers. They had marched for thirty-six hours. Now they were resting. But at midnight they would climb that road up the rocky cliff.

Their plan was to attack by surprise an army of southerners, camped on the other side of the cliff. But if their enemy learned about the Union Army hiding in the forest, the soldiers would find themselves in a trap with no escape. That was why Carter Druse had been sent to guard the road.

It was his duty to be sure that no enemy soldier, dressed in gray, spied on the valley, where the union army was hiding.

But Carter Druse had fallen asleep. Suddenly, as if a messenger of fate came to touch him on the shoulder, the young man opened his eyes. As he lifted his head, he saw a man on horseback standing on the huge rocky cliff that looked down into the valley.

The rider and his horse stood so still that they seemed made of stone. The mans gray uniform blended with the blue sky and the white clouds behind him. He held a gun in his right hand, and the horses reins in the other.

Carter could not see the mans face, because the rider was looking down into the valley. But the man and his horse seemed to be of heroic, almost

gigantic size, standing there motionless against the sky. Carter discovered he was very much afraid, even though he knew the enemy soldier could not see him hiding in the bushes.

Suddenly the horse moved, pulling back its head from the edge of the cliff. Carter was completely awake now. He raised his gun, pushing its barrel through the bushes. And he aimed for the horsemans heart. A small squeeze of the trigger, and Carter Druse would have done his duty.

At that instant, the horseman turned his head and looked in Carters direction. He seemed to look at Carters face, into his eyes, and deep into his brave, generous heart.

Carters face became very white. His entire body began shaking. His mind began to race, and in his fantasy, the horse and rider became black figures, rising and falling in slow circles against a fiery red sky.

Carter did not pull the trigger. Instead, he let go of his gun and slowly dropped his face until it rested again in the dirt.

Brave and strong as he was, Carter almost fainted from the shock of what he had seen.

Is it so terrible to kill an enemy who might kill you and your friends? Carter knew that this man must be shot from ambush -- without warning. This man must die without a moment to prepare his soul; without even the chance to say a silent prayer.

Slowly, a hope began to form in Carter Druses mind. Perhaps the southern soldier had not seen the northern troops.

Perhaps he was only admiring the view. Perhaps he would now turn and ride carelessly away.

Then Carter looked down into the valley so far below. He saw a line of men in blue uniforms and their horses, slowly leaving the protection of the forest. A foolish Union officer had permitted his soldiers to bring their

horses to drink at a small stream near the forest. And there they were -- in plain sight!

Carter Druse looked back to the man and horse standing there against the sky. Again he took aim. But this time he pointed his gun at the horse.

Words rang in his head -- the last words his father ever spoke to him: "No matter what happens, be sure you always do what you think is your duty."

Carter Druse was calm as he pulled the trigger of his gun.

At that moment, a Union officer happened to look up from his hiding place near the edge of the forest. His eyes climbed to the top of the cliff that looked over the valley. Just looking at the top of the gigantic rock, so far above him, made the soldier feel dizzy.

And then the officer saw something that filled his heart with horror. A man on a horse was riding down into the valley through the air!

The rider sat straight in his saddle. His hair streamed back, waving in the wind. His left hand held his horses reins while his right hand was hidden in the cloud of the horses mane. The horse looked as if it were galloping across the earth. Its body was proud and noble.

As the frightened Union officer watched this horseman in the sky, he almost believed he was witnessing a messenger from heaven. A messenger who had come to announce the end of the world. The officers legs grew weak, and he fell. At almost the same instant, he heard a crashing sound in the trees. The sound died without an echo. And all was silent.

The officer got to his feet, still shaking. He went back to his camp. But he didnt tell anyone what he had seen. He knew no one would ever believe him.

Soon after firing his gun, Carter Druse was joined by a Union sergeant. Carter did not turn his head as the sergeant kneeled beside him.

"Did you fire?" The sergeant whispered.

"Yes."

"At what?"

"A horse. It was on that rock. Its not there now. It went over the cliff."

Carters face was white. But he showed no other sign of emotion. The sergeant did not understand.

"See here, Druse," he said, after a moments silence. "Why are you making this into a mystery. I order you to report. Was there anyone on the horse?"

"Yes."

"Who? "

"My father."

Announcer: You have heard the story called, "A Horseman in the Sky." It was written by Ambrose Bierce, and adapted for Special English by Dona de Sanctis. Your storyteller was Roy Depew.

For VOA Special English, this is Shirley Griffith.

