A Mystery of Heroism  
By Stephen Crane

**Directions:** Read the short story and answer the questions that follow. Refer to the text to check your answers.

The dark uniforms of the men were so coated with dust from the incessant\(^1\) wrestling of the two armies that the regiment\(^2\) almost seemed a part of the clay bank which shielded them from the shells. On the top of the hill a battery was arguing in tremendous roars with some other guns, and to the eye of the infantry, the artillerymen, the guns, the caissons\(^3\), the horses, were distinctly outlined upon the blue sky. When a piece was fired, a red streak as round as a log flashed low in the heavens, like a monstrous bolt of lightning. The men of the battery wore white duck trousers, which somehow emphasized their legs: and when they ran and crowded in little groups at the bidding of the shouting officers, it was more impressive than usual to the infantry.

Fred Collins, of A Company, was saying: "Thunder, I wisht I had a drink. Ain't there any water round here?" Then, somebody yelled: "There goes th' bugler!"

As the eyes of half the regiment swept in one machine-like movement, there was an instant's picture of a horse in a great convulsive leap of a death-wound and a rider leaning back with a crooked arm and spread fingers before his face. On the ground was the crimson terror of an exploding shell, with fibres of flame that seemed like lances. A glittering bugle swung clear of the rider's back as fell headlong the horse and the man. In the air was an odour as from a conflagration\(^4\).

Sometimes they of the infantry looked down at a fair little meadow which spread around at their feet. Its long, green grass was rippling gently in a breeze. Beyond it was the grey form of a house half torn to pieces by shells and by the busy axes of soldiers who had pursued firewood. The line of an old fence was now dimly marked by long weeds and by an occasional post. A shell had blown the well-house to fragments. Little lines of grey smoke ribboning upward from some embers indicated the place where had stood the barn.

From beyond a curtain of green woods there came the sound of some stupendous scuffle, as if two animals of the size of islands were fighting. At a distance there were occasional appearances of swift-moving men, horses, batteries, flags, and, with the crashing of infantry volleys were heard, often, wild and frenzied cheers. In the midst of it all Smith and Ferguson, two privates\(^5\) of A Company, were engaged in a heated discussion, which involved the greatest questions of the national existence.

The battery\(^6\) on the hill presently engaged in a frightful duel. The white legs of the gunners scampered this way and that way, and the officers redoubled their shouts. The guns, with their demeanors of stolidity and courage, were typical of something infinitely self-possessed\(^7\) in this clamor of death that swirled around the hill.

One of a swing team was suddenly smitten quivering to the ground, and his maddened brethren dragged his torn body in their struggle to escape from this turmoil and danger. A young soldier astride one of the leaders swore and fumed in his saddle, and furiously jerked at the bridle. An officer screamed out an order so violently that his voice broke and ended the sentence in a falsetto\(^8\) shriek.

The leading company of the infantry regiment was somewhat exposed, and the colonel ordered it moved more fully under the shelter of the hill. There was the clank of steel against steel.

A lieutenant of the battery rode down and passed them, holding his right arm carefully in his left hand. And it was as if this arm was not at all a part of him, but belonged to another man. His sober and reflective charger\(^9\) went slowly. The officer's face was grimy and perspiring, and his uniform was tousled as if he had been in direct grapple with an enemy. He smiled grimly when the men stared at him. He turned his horse toward the meadow.

Collins, of A Company, said: "I wisht I had a drink. I bet there's water in that there ol' well yonder!"

"Yes; but how you goin' to git it?"

For the little meadow which intervened was now suffering a terrible onslaught of shells. Its green and beautiful calm had vanished utterly. Brown earth was being flung in monstrous handfuls. And there was a massacre of the young blades of grass. They were being torn, burned, obliterated. Some curious fortune of the battle had made this gentle little meadow the object of the red hate of the shells, and each one as it exploded seemed like an imprecation in the face of a maiden.

The wounded officer who was riding across this expance said to himself: "Why, they couldn't shoot any harder if the whole army was massed here!"

A shell struck the grey ruins of the house, and as, after the roar, the shattered wall fell in fragments, there was a noise which resembled the flapping of shutters during a wild gale of winter. Indeed, the infantry paused in the shelter of the bank appeared as men standing upon a shore contemplating a madness of the sea. The angel of calamity had under its glance the battery upon the hill.

**Vocabulary**
1. **incessant**: without pause or stop; not ending
2. **regiment**: a unit of armed troops under an officer's command
3. **caisson**: a large box to hold ammunition
4. **conflagration**: a large fire; a large-scale conflict
5. **private**: a soldier of the lowest rank in the army
6. **battery**: a coordinated group of artillery weapons
7. **self-possessed**: confident, assured and poised
8. **falsetto**: speech or singing using the highest vocal folds
9. **charger**: a large horse trained for battle and used by the cavalry
Collins said, in a terrible voice: "You see now!" At this ominous threat his comrades broke into renewed jeers.

Collins gave them a dark scowl, and went to find his captain. The latter was conversing with the colonel of the regiment.

"Captain," said Collins, saluting and standing at attention-in those days all trousers bagged at the knees--"Captain, I wan't t' get permission to go git some water from that there well over yonder!"

The colonel and the captain swung about simultaneously and stared across the meadow. The captain laughed. "You must be pretty thirsty, Collins?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Well--ah," said the captain. After a moment, he asked, "Can't you wait?"

"No, sir."

The colonel was watching Collins's face. "Look here, my lad," he said, in a pious sort of a voice--"Look here, my lad"--Collins was not a lad--"don't you think that's taking pretty big risks for a little drink of water."

"I dunno," said Collins uncomfortably. Some of the resentment toward his companions, which perhaps had forced him into this affair, was beginning to fade. "I dunno whether 'tis."

The colonel and the captain contemplated him for a time.

"Well," said the captain finally.

"Well," said the colonel, "if you want to go, why, go."

Collins saluted. "Much obliged t' yeh."

As he moved away the colonel called after him. "Take some of the other boys' canteens with you an' hurry back now."

The colonel and the captain looked at each other then, for it had suddenly occurred that they could not for the life of them tell whether Collins wanted to go or whether he did not.

They turned to regard Collins, and as they perceived him surrounded by gesticulating comrades, the colonel said: "Well, by thunder! I guess he's going."

Collins appeared as a man dreaming. In the midst of the questions, the advice, the warnings, all the excited talk of his company mates, he maintained a curious silence.

They were very busy in preparing him for his ordeal. When they inspected him carefully, it was somewhat like the examination that grooms give a horse before a race; and they were amazed, staggered by the whole affair. Their astonishment found vent in strange repetitions.

Vocabulary

10. ruck: a throng or crowd of people or things; a mass, a pack
11. ominous: giving indication of a coming ill; being an evil omen
12. gesticulate: to make expressive gestures or motions
"Are yeh sure a-goin'?" they demanded again and again.
"Certainly I am," cried Collins at last furiously.

He strode sullenly away from them. He was swinging five or six canteens by their cords. It seemed that his cap would not remain firmly on his head, and often he reached and pulled it down over his brow.

There was a general movement in the compact column. The long animal-like thing moved slightly. Its four hundred eyes were turned upon the figure of Collins.

"Well, sir, if that ain't th' derndest thing! I never thought Fred Collins had the blood in him for that kind of business."

"What's he goin' to do, anyhow?"
"He's goin' to that well there after water."
"We ain't dyin' of thirst, are we? That's foolishness."
"Well, somebody put him up to it, an' he's doin' it."
"Say, he must be a desperate cuss."

When Collins faced the meadow and walked away from the regiment, he was vaguely conscious that a chasm, the deep valley of all prides, was suddenly between him and his comrades. It was provisional, but the provision was that he return as a victor. He had blindly been led by quaint emotions, and laid himself under an obligation to walk squarely up to the face of death.

But he was not sure that he wished to make a retraction, even if he could do so without shame. As a matter of truth, he was sure of very little. He was mainly surprised.

It seemed to him supernaturally strange that he had allowed his mind to maneuver his body into such a situation. He understood that it might be called dramatically great.

However, he had no full appreciation of anything, excepting that he was actually conscious of being dazed. He could feel his dulled mind groping after the form and colour of this incident. He wondered why he did not feel some keen agony of fear cutting his sense like a knife. He wondered at this, because human expression had said loudly for centuries that men should feel afraid of certain things, and that all men who did not feel this fear were phenomena—heroes.

He was, then, a hero. He suffered that disappointment which we would all have if we discovered that we were ourselves capable of those deeds which we most admire in history and legend. This, then, was a hero. After all, heroes were not much.

No, it could not be true. He was not a hero. Heroes had no shames in their lives, and, as for him, he remembered borrowing fifteen dollars from a friend and promising to pay it back the next day, and then avoiding that friend for ten months. When at home his mother had aroused him for the early labor of his life on the farm, it had often been his fashion to be irritable, childish, diabolical; and his mother had died since he had come to the war.

He saw that, in this matter of the well, the canteens, the shells, he was an intruder in the land of fine deeds.

He was now about thirty paces from his comrades. The regiment had just turned its many faces toward him.

From the forest of terrific noises there suddenly emerged a little uneven line of men. They fired fiercely and rapidly at distant foliage on which appeared little puffs of white smoke. The spatter of skirmish firing was added to the thunder of the guns on the hill. The little line of men ran forward. A color-sergeant fell flat with his flag as if he had slipped on ice. There was hoarse cheering from this distant field.

Collins suddenly felt that two demon fingers were pressed into his ears. He could see nothing but flying arrows, flaming red. He lurched from the shock of this explosion, but he made a mad rush for the house, which he viewed as a man submerged to the neck in a boiling surf might view the shore. In the air, little pieces of shell howled and the earthquake explosions drove him insane with the menace of their roar. As he ran the canteens knocked together with a rhythmical tinkling.

As he neared the house, each detail of the scene became vivid to him. He was aware of some bricks of the vanished chimney lying on the sod. There was a door which hung by one hinge.

Rifle bullets called forth by the insistent skirmishers came from the far-off bank of foliage. They mingled with the shells and the pieces of shells until the air was torn in all directions by hootings, yells, howls. The sky was full of friends who directed all their wild rage at his head.

When he came to the well, he flung himself face downward and peered into its darkness. There were furtive silver glintings some feet from the surface. He grabbed one of the canteens, and, unfastening its cap, swung it down by the cord. The water flowed slowly in with an indolent gurgle.

And now as he lay with his face turned away he was suddenly smitten with the terror. It came upon his heart like the grasp of claws. All the power faded from his muscles. For an instant he was no more than a dead man.

**Vocabulary**

13. cuss: a fellow, person
14. provisional: temporary, based on conditions
15. phenomena: a wonderful or very remarkable person or thing
16. diabolical: extremely wicked or cruel
17. foliage: the leaves of plants
18. indolent: lazy; procrastinating
The canteen filled with a maddening slowness, in the manner of all bottles. Presently he recovered his strength and addressed a screaming oath to it. He leaned over until it seemed as if he intended to try to push water into it with his hands. His eyes as he gazed down into the well shone like two pieces of metal, and in their expression was a great appeal and a great curse. The stupid water derided him.

There was the blaring thunder of a shell. Crimson light shone through the swift-boiling smoke, and made a pink reflection on part of the wall of the well. Collins jerked out his arm and canteen with the same motion that a man would use in withdrawing his head from a furnace.

He scrambled erect and glared and hesitated. On the ground near him lay the old well bucket, with a length of rusty chain. He lowered it swiftly into the well. The bucket struck the water and then, turning lazily over, sank. When, with hand reaching tremblingly over hand, he hauled it out, it knocked often against the walls of the well and spilled some of its contents.

In running with a filled bucket, a man can adopt but one kind of gait. So through this terrible field, over which screamed practical angels of death, Collins ran in the manner of a farmer chased out of a dairy by a bull.

His face went staring white with anticipation--anticipation of a blow that would whirl him around and down. He would fall as he had seen other men fall, the life knocked out of them so suddenly that their knees were no more quick to touch the ground than their heads. He saw the long blue line of the regiment, but his comrades were standing looking at him from the edge of an impossible star. He was aware of some deep wheel-ruts and hoof-prints in the sod beneath his feet.

The artillery officer who had fallen in this meadow had been making groans in the teeth of the tempest of sound. These futile cries, wrenched from him by his agony, were heard only by shells, bullets. When wild-eyed Collins came running, this officer raised himself. His face contorted and blanched from pain, he was about to utter some great beseeching cry. But suddenly his face straightened and he called:

"Say, young man, give me a drink of water, will you?"

Collins had no room amid his emotions for surprise. He was mad from the threats of destruction.

"I can't!" he screamed, and in his reply was a full description of his quaking apprehension. His cap was gone and his hair was riotous. His clothes made it appear that he had been dragged over the ground by the heels. He ran on.

The officer's head sank down, and one elbow crooked. His foot in its brass-bound stirrup still stretched over the body of his horse, and the other leg was under the steed.

But Collins turned. He came dashing back. His face had now turned grey, and in his eyes was all terror. "Here it is! here it is!"

The officer was as a man gone in drink. His arm bent like a twig. His head drooped as if his neck were of willow. He was sinking to the ground, to lie face downward.

Collins grabbed him by the shoulder. "Here it is. Here's your drink. Turn over. Turn over, man, for God's sake!"

With Collins hauling at his shoulder, the officer twisted his body and fell with his face turned toward that region where lived the unspeakable noises of the swirling missiles. There was the faintest shadow of a smile on his lips as he looked at Collins. He gave a sigh, a little primitive breath like that from a child.

Collins tried to hold the bucket steadily, but his shaking hands caused the water to splash all over the face of the dying man. Then he jerked it away and ran on.

The regiment gave him a welcoming roar. The grimed faces were wrinkled in laughter.

His captain waved the bucket away. "Give it to the men!"

The two genial, skylarking young lieutenants were the first to gain possession of it. They played over it in their fashion.

When one tried to drink the other teasingly knocked his elbow. "Don't, Billie! You'll make me spill it," said the one. The other laughed.

Suddenly there was an oath, the thud of wood on the ground, and a swift murmur of astonishment among the ranks. The two lieutenants glared at each other. The bucket lay on the ground empty.

Vocabulary

19. oath: a curse or profane utterance
20. deride: to harshly mock; ridicule
21. gait: manner of walking or stepping
22. tempest: any violent commotion; a storm with severe winds
23. futile: useless; not successful; not worth attempting
24. blanched: lacking complexion or color
25. beseech: a heartfelt plea
26. apprehension: dread or fear at the prospect of some future ill
27. genial: friendly and cheerful
28. skylark: to play around, play tricks
A Mystery of Heroism | Reading Quiz

1. Which best explains what the author includes the following sentence from the fourth paragraph?

"Sometimes they of the infantry looked down at a fair little meadow which spread at their feet. Its long, green grass was rippling gently in a breeze."

a. He is foreshadowing how all of the infantrymen will be buried in this field.
b. He is trying to create a calm mood that is appropriate for the conflict.
c. He is contrasting the horror of war with the beauty of nature.
d. He is setting the stage for a flashback into Fred Collins' childhood.

2. The narrator describes each of the following EXCEPT which?

a. A soldier with no shoes cuts his feet on sharp rocks while running away from battle.
b. A rider loses control of his horse team when one of them is injured.
c. An officer rides past his men while holding his detached right arm in his left hand.
d. A beautiful meadow is destroyed by artillery shells.

3. Which character trait is NOT displayed by Fred Collins of A company?

a. He is cunning.  b. He is stubborn.
c. He is courageous. d. He is proud.

4. Which provides the greatest motivation for Collins to get the water?

a. He wants to help the wounded officer.  b. He will die of thirst if he does not get a drink soon.
c. He help the other men regain their fighting spirit.  d. He does not want to be teased by the other soldiers.

5. Which of the following statements about Collins' mission is true?

a. The captain orders Collins to go.  b. Collins is taking an unnecessary risk.
c. The men are depending on Collins.  d. Collins was afraid before he went on the mission.

6. What is the narrator trying to teach readers about heroism?

a. There are no heroes in war.  b. Every soldier who fights is a hero.
c. Any reckless fool can be a hero.  d. Heroes are born with exceptional qualities.

7. Which best explains what the author includes the following sentence from the fourth paragraph?

"He saw that, in this matter of the well, the canteens, the shells, he was an intruder in the land of fine deeds."


8. Which event happens last?

a. Collins fills up the bucket.  b. Collins speaks with the Captain.
c. The other soldiers tease Collins.  d. Collins helps the wounded officer.

9. If this story were to continue, which event would be most likely to occur next?

a. The lieutenant would refill the bucket.  b. The men would continue teasing Collins.
c. Collins would be promoted to general.  d. Collins would go back to the well to get more water.

10. What is ironic about how the story ends?

a. The officer that Collins helped was fighting for the other side.
b. The other soldiers doubted Collins but he succeeded.
c. The water gets spilled before any of the men can drink it.
d. Collins didn't feel like a hero, but he did a heroic thing.
**Long Response:** Answer the following question in complete sentences.

1. Is Collins a "real" hero? Why or why not? Use the text to support your response.
A Mystery of Heroism book. Read reviews from world’s largest community for readers. Though best known for The Red Badge of Courage, his classic novel of...Â Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking â€œA Mystery of Heroismâ€ as Want to Read: Want to Read saving… Want to Read. Currently Reading. Read. Other editions. Enlarge cover. A Mystery Of Heroism. Stephen Crane. â€œ19-page comprehensive study guide.Â Thanks for exploring this SuperSummary Study Guide of â€œA Mystery Of Heroismâ€ by Stephen Crane. A modern alternative to SparkNotes and CliffsNotes, SuperSummary offers high-quality study guides that feature detailed chapter summaries and analysis of major themes, characters, quotes, and essay topics. Summary: "A Mystery of Heroism". In Stephen Craneâ€™s short story, â€œA Mystery of Heroism,â€ (originally syndicated in newspapers in 1895 and then published a year later in The Little Regiment, and Other Episodes of the American Civil War), a brutal battle is waged between two armies. "A Mystery of Heroism" is set against the backdrop of the Civil War. Collins, the protagonist, is a member of A Company, which is pinned down on the side of a hill by the relentless onslaught of Latest answer posted February 1, 2016 10:49 am UTC. 1 educator answer. A Mystery of Heroism. How does Crane use color to convey imagery?Â Fred Collins in â€œA Mystery of Heroismâ€ finds himself and his other soldiers pinned down by a battle raging around them. Collins decides he is thirsty and sees a well in the middle of the Latest answer posted December 20, 2015 12:18 am UTC. 1 educator answer. A Mystery of Heroism. What is the thesis of "A Mystery of Heroism"? Crane also shows heroism works in very mysterious ways. In another of Craneâ€™s shorts, The Bride Comes To Yellow Sky, the character of Jack Potter is put to the task of proving his heroism as sheriff of his town. As the story opens, the reader is introduced to Jack as a subtle, quiet man. He is on his way to Yellow Sky, Texas riding in a parlor-car with his new wife.Â Irony and Sarcasm in A Mystery of Heroism and War is Kind In literature, similar themes are portrayed in many different ways, mostly according to the time period they were written in. A new generation of writers came of age after the civil war, known as the realists. They dominated American fiction from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. Main A Mystery of Heroism. Mark as downloaded. A Mystery of Heroism. Crane Stephen. CategoriesÂ Heroes had no shame in their lives, and, as for him, he remembered borrowing fifteen dollars from a friend and promising to pay it back the next day, and then avoiding that friend for ten months. When, at home, his mother had aroused him for the early labor of his. A mystery of heroism //. 9. life on the farm, it had often been his fashion to be irritable, childish, diabolical; and his mother had died since he had come to the war.