

Background Born in November of 1871, Stephen Crane began writing at the age of four. The *Red Badge of Courage*, his famous novel on the Civil War, was published when he was only twenty-four years old. The book made Crane a celebrity and national expert on the war. Crane interviewed Civil War veterans for his fictional writing, but they seemed unable to articulate their feelings about the war. As a result, Crane drew on his own imagination to fill in their thoughts and feelings to give his words larger meaning.



A Mystery of Heroism

Short Story by Stephen Crane

1. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 1–23, begin to cite text evidence.

- Underline details that reveal the setting, time, and place the action occurs. Write the setting in the margin.
- Circle images that appeal to your sense of sight, smell, or hearing.
- In the margin, restate what Fred Collins says in lines 13–15.

CLOSE READ
Notes

The dark uniforms of the men were so coated with dust from the incessant wrestling of the two armies that the regiment almost seemed a part of the clay bank which shielded them from the shells. On the top of the hill a battery¹ was arguing in tremendous roars with some other guns, and to the eye of the infantry, the artillerymen, the guns, the caissons,² 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!”

¹ **battery:** set of heavy guns.

² **caissons:** ammunition wagons.

As the eyes of half of 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
 20 the crimson terror of an exploding shell, with fibers 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 odor as from a conflagration.³

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. Beyond it was the gray 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
 30 fragments. Little lines of gray 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 of A Company, were engaged in a heated discussion, which involved the greatest questions of the national existence.

³ **conflagration:** huge fire.

2. ◀ **REREAD** Reread lines 1–23. What is unexpected about Fred Collins's statement in lines 13–15? Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

3. ▶ **READ** As you read lines 24–71, continue to cite textual evidence.
- Circle phrases that describe the meadow.
 - In the margin, explain what happens to the house and barn in lines 24–31.
 - Underline images in lines 40–50 that suggest fear and terror.

stolidity:

40 The battery 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 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
50 his voice broke and ended the sentence in a falsetto 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 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
60 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 gain’ 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
70 and each one as it exploded seemed like an imprecation⁴ in the face of a maiden.

⁴ **imprecation:** curse.

4. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 64–71. How might the destruction of the meadow reflect the impact of war? Cite text evidence in your answer.

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

A shell struck the gray 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 the calamity had under its glance the battery upon the hill. Fewer white-legged men labored about the guns. A shell had smitten one of the pieces and after the flare, the smoke, the dust, the wrath of this blow was gone, it was possible to see white legs stretched horizontally upon the ground. And at that interval to the rear, where it is the business of battery horses to stand with their noses to the fight awaiting the command to drag their guns out of the destruction or into it or wheresoever these incomprehensible humans demanded with whip and spur—in this line of passive and dumb spectators, whose fluttering hearts yet would not let them forget the iron laws of man's control of them—in this rank of brute soldiers there had been relentless and hideous carnage. From the ruck⁵ of bleeding and **prostrate** horses, the men of the infantry could see one animal raising its stricken body with its forelegs and turning its nose with mystic and profound eloquence toward the sky.

prostrate:

Some comrades joked Collins about his thirst. "Well, if yeh want a drink so bad, why don't yeh go git it?"

"Well, I will in a minnet if yeh don't shut up."

A lieutenant of the artillery floundered his horse straight down the hill with as great concern as of it were level ground. As he

⁵ **ruck**: mass, crowd.

5. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 72–94, circle the repeated image. In the margin, explain why Crane may have chosen to emphasize this image. Consider what the image may symbolize in your response.

100 galloped past the colonel of the infantry, he threw up his hand in a swift salute. “We’ve got to get out of that,” he roared angrily. He was a black-bearded officer, and his eyes, which resembled beads, sparkled like those of an insane man. His jumping horse sped along the column of infantry.

The fat major standing carelessly with his sword held horizontally behind him and with his legs far apart, looked after the receding horseman and laughed. “He wants to get back with orders pretty quick or there’ll be no batt’ry left,” he observed.

110 The wise young captain of the second company hazarded to the lieutenant colonel that the enemy’s infantry would probably soon attack the hill, and the lieutenant colonel snubbed him.

A private in one of the rear companies looked out over the meadow and then turned to a companion and said: “Look there, Jim.” It was the wounded officer from the battery, who some time before had started to ride across the meadow, supporting his right arm carefully with his left hand. This man had encountered a shell apparently at a time when no one perceived him and he could now be seen lying face downward with a stirruped foot stretched across the body of his dead horse. A leg of the charger extended slantingly upward precisely as stiff as a stake. Around this motionless pair the shells still howled.

120 There was a quarrel in A Company. Collins was shaking his fist in the faces of some laughing comrades. “Dern yeh! I ain’t afraid t’ go. If yeh say much, I will go!”

“Of course, yeh will! Yeh’ll run through that there medder, won’t yeh?”

Collins said, in a terrible voice: “You see, now!” At this **ominous** threat his comrades broke into renewed jeers.

ominous:

6. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 95–154, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline what Collins says in response to his fellow officers.
- Circle the words the colonel uses to refer to Collins. In the margin, explain what this dialogue reveals about the colonel.

Collins gave them a dark scowl and went to find his captain. The
130 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 want t’ git 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?”

140 “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 wether ’tis.”

The colonel and the captain contemplated him for a time.

“Well,” said the captain finally.

150 “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.”

“Yes, sir. I will.”

7. ◀ REREAD Reread lines 95–154. What does Collins’s dialogue reveal about his character? Support your answer with explicit text evidence.

8. READ ▶ As you read lines 155–183, continue to cite text evidence.

- Underline details that describe Collins’s appearance.
- In the margin, explain what is “curious” about Collins’s manner.

“ I never thought Fred Collins had the blood in him for that kind of business.”

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.”

gesticulating:

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.

“Are yeh sure a-goin’?” they demanded again and again.

“Certainly I am,” cried Collins, at last furiously.

170 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?”

180 “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.

190 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 color of this incident.

200 Too, 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.

9. ◀ REREAD Reread lines 164–183. What do you think finally provokes Collins’s decision to leave the regiment and go to the well?

10. READ ▶ As you read lines 184–218, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Circle the phrases in 184–203 that describe Collins’s thoughts and feelings about his situation.
- In the margin, explain why Collins thinks he is a hero.
- In lines 208–218, underline reasons why Collins says he is not a hero.

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
210 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
220 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 a distant field.

11. **REREAD** Reread lines 184–218. What attributes does Collins possess that make him an unlikely hero? Cite explicit textual evidence in your response.

12. **READ** As you read lines 219–240, continue to cite text evidence.

- Underline images that appeal to your sense of hearing.
- In the margin, summarize what happens in lines 219–224.
- Circle details in lines 233–240 that describe the setting.

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 fiends who directed all their wild rage at his head.

13. **REREAD** Reread lines 219–240. How does Crane’s word choice create a frightening mood? Support your answer with specific text evidence.

14. **READ** As you read lines 241–278, continue to cite text evidence.
- Underline phrases that provide details about the setting.
 - In the margin, summarize what happens at the well.
 - In the margin, write what the “long blue line of the regiment” may refer to.

“ *And now as he lay with his face turned away he was suddenly smitten with the terror.* ”

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.

indolent:

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.

250 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.

260 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.

270

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?”

280

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

“I can’t,” he screamed, and in this reply was a full description of his quaking apprehension. His cap was gone and his hair was riotous.

15. **REREAD** Reread lines 241–278. How does the author create a scary and chaotic mood in these lines? Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

16. **READ** As you read lines 279–301, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline details that tell you the artillery officer is in pain.
- Circle details that describe Collins’s physical appearance.
- In the margin, summarize Collins’s actions in these lines.

290 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 gray and in his eye 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 was of willow. He was sinking to the ground to lie face downward.

300 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.

310 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!"

17. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 279–301. Which details in these lines suggest that Collins acted heroically? Cite text evidence in your response.

18. **▶ READ** As you read lines 302–320, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline the officer's reaction to Collins's kindness.
- In the margin, restate what happens to the bucket of water.
- Circle the words used to describe the regiment.

