

The four grenadiers fell back to their places. Staps was left alone, bound to a stake beside an open grave.

In that moment of awful solitude the essential agony began. His grave, black and deep as a pit, was at his feet. There in a second or two he would lie unresisting and still, and those two heaps of earth be piled above him. And the forces of his youth, the horrible life-thirst, sobbed and clamoured and raged in him. Why was he to be shot down? What right had these Frenchmen to murder him? He cast an appealing, frightful glance at their six faces. One was a boy like himself; another under a fierce look was hiding the compassion he dared not or would not manifest. What made these men assassins—and those grenadiers that stood looking on, silent as those walls? He felt his mind confused; and he lost his way. The cords drawn violently across his breast oppressed his breathing. His throat was parched. His head began to turn from side to side, restlessly, feverously. But no one came to his aid. No one even noticed his misery. And the last loneliness swept around him, a most harrowing, stern loneliness, that of a world in which he saw nothing but enemies, strong and implacable, looking hate and death at him—here where he stood, pinioned by an open grave, his grave. He moaned, and an inward, supreme, fearful struggle began; and in that struggle the boy found his road, never to lose it again.

In the pause the balance still hung between victory and despair; but the immense hush and the white glories of the dawn, one mystic splendour from horizon to zenith, suddenly upbore him. He heard words and voices and singing, the riding of horses. He saw again the hero-shapes, colossal, like resting clouds or shadowy towers, waiting, waiting, regardful how he, a German, should die. His loneliness was gone; these were his companions; and vanquishing the sick weight on his heart, louder and clearer than he knew he shouted in French: