

The story is set in an army camp in Southern America and the outcome is announced from the opening lines of the novel: "There is a fort in the South where a few years ago a murder was committed. The participants of this tragedy were: two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse". So the reader is warned and is expecting it all along the novel. The extract under study is the excipit of the novel.

5 The rain stopped at midnight. Long ago the lights  
in the barracks had been turned off. Private Williams  
had not undressed himself, and when the rain was  
over he put on his tennis shoes and went outside. On  
his way to the Captain's quarters he took his usual  
route, skirting<sup>1</sup> the woods surrounding the post. But  
tonight there was no moon and the soldier was walking  
much faster than usual. Once he lost himself, and  
when at last he reached the Captain's house he had an  
10 accident. In the darkness he stumbled into what  
seemed to him at first to be a deep pit.<sup>2</sup> In order to get  
his bearings<sup>3</sup> he struck a few matches and saw that he  
had fallen into a recently dug hole. The house was  
dark, and the soldier, who was now scratched,<sup>4</sup> muddy,  
15 and breathless, waited a few moments before going  
inside. In all he had come six times before, and this  
was the seventh and would be the last.

20 Captain Penderton was standing at the back window  
of his bedroom. He had taken three capsules, but still  
he could not sleep. He was slightly drunk with  
brandy, and a little drugged – but that was all. The  
Captain, who was keenly<sup>5</sup> sensitive to luxury and a  
finicky<sup>6</sup> dresser, wore only the coarsest<sup>7</sup> sleeping  
25 garments. He had on now a wrapper of rough black  
wool that might<sup>8</sup> have been bought for a recently  
widowed matron of a jail. His pyjamas were of some  
unbleached material as stiff as canvas. He was bare-  
footed, although the floor was now cold.

30 The Captain was listening to the sough<sup>9</sup> of the wind  
in the pine trees when he saw out in the night a tiny  
flicker of flame. The light was blown out by the wind  
in only a moment, but during that instant the Captain  
had seen a face. And that face, brightened by the flame  
and set in darkness, made the Captain stop his breath.  
35 He watched and could vaguely make out the figure  
that crossed the lawn. The Captain clutched<sup>10</sup> the front  
of his wrapper and pressed his hand against his breast.  
He closed his eyes and waited.

40 At first no sound came to him. Then he could feel  
rather than hear the cautious footsteps on the stairs.  
The Captain's door was ajar and through the crack he  
saw a dark silhouette. He whispered something, but  
his voice was so sibilant and low that it sounded like  
the wind outside.

45 Captain Penderton waited. With his eyes closed  
again, he stood there for moments of anguished sus-  
pense. Then he went out into the hall and saw outlined  
50 against the pale grey window of his wife's room the  
one for whom he sought.<sup>11</sup> Afterwards the Captain was  
to tell himself that in this one instant he knew every-  
thing. Actually, in a moment when a great but un-  
known shock is expected, the mind instinctively  
65 prepares itself by abandoning momentarily the faculty  
of surprise. In that vulnerable instant a kaleidoscope  
of half-guessed possibilities project themselves, and  
when the disaster has defined itself there is the feeling  
of having understood beforehand in some super-  
natural way. The Captain took his pistol from the  
70 drawer of his bed-table, crossed the hall, and switched  
on the light in his wife's room. As he did this, cer-  
tain dormant fragments of memory – a shadow at  
the window, a sound in the night – came to him. He  
said to himself that he knew all. But what it was he  
knew he could not have expressed. He was only cer-  
tain that this was the end.

The soldier did not have time to rise from his squat-  
ting position. He blinked<sup>12</sup> at the light and there was no  
fear in his face; his expression was one of dazed<sup>13</sup> annoy-  
ance, as if he had been inexcusably disturbed. The  
75 Captain was a good marksman,<sup>14</sup> and although he shot  
twice only one raw hole was left in the centre of the  
soldier's chest.

The reports from the pistol aroused Leonora and  
she sat up in bed. As yet she was still only half-awake,  
80 and she stared about her as though witnessing some  
scene in a play, some tragedy that was gruesome<sup>15</sup> but  
not necessary to believe. Almost immediately Major  
Langdon knocked on the back door and then hurried  
up the stairs wearing slippers and a dressing-gown.  
85 The Captain had slumped<sup>16</sup> against the wall. In his  
queer, coarse wrapper he resembled a broken and dis-  
sipated<sup>17</sup> monk. Even in death the body of the soldier  
still had the look of warm, animal comfort. His grave  
face was unchanged, and his sun-browned hands lay  
palm upwards on the carpet as though in sleep.