

Bierce Ambrose

**The Letters of Ambrose Bierce,
With a Memoir by George
Sterling**



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The Introduction

by Bertha Clark Pope

"The question that starts to the lips of ninety-nine readers out of a hundred," says Arnold Bennett, in a review in the London New Age in 1909, "even the best informed, will assuredly be: 'Who is Ambrose Bierce?' I scarcely know, but I will say that among what I may term 'underground reputations' that of Ambrose Bierce is perhaps the most striking example. You may wander for years through literary circles and never meet anybody who has heard of Ambrose Bierce, and then you may hear some erudite student whisper in an awed voice: 'Ambrose Bierce is the greatest living prose writer.' I have heard such an opinion expressed."

Bierce himself shows his recognition of the "underground" quality of his reputation in a letter to George Sterling: "How

many times, and during a period of how many years must one's unexplainable obscurity be pointed out to constitute fame? Not knowing, I am almost disposed to consider myself the most famous of authors. I have pretty nearly ceased to be 'discovered,' but my notoriety as an obscurian may be said to be worldwide and everlasting."

Anything which would throw light on such a figure, at once obscure and famous, is valuable. These letters of Ambrose Bierce, here printed for the first time, are therefore of unusual interest. They are the informal literary work – the term is used advisedly – of a man esteemed great by a small but acutely critical group, read enthusiastically by a somewhat larger number to whom critical examination of what they read seldom occurs, and ignored by the vast majority of readers; a man at once more hated and more adored than any on the Pacific Coast; a man not ten years off the scene yet already become a tradition and a legend; whose life, no less than his death, held elements of mystery, baffling contradictions, problems for puzzled conjecture, motives and meanings not vouchsafed to outsiders.

Were Ambrose Bierce as well known as he deserves to be, the introduction to these letters could be slight; we should not have to stop to inquire who he was and what he did. As it is, we must.

Ambrose Bierce, the son of Marcus Aurelius and Laura (Sherwood) Bierce, born in Meiggs County, Ohio, June 24, 1842, was at the outbreak of the Civil War a youth without formal education, but with a mind already trained. "My father was a

poor farmer," he once said to a friend, "and could give me no general education, but he had a good library, and to his books I owe all that I have." He promptly volunteered in 1861 and served throughout the war. Twice, at the risk of his life, he rescued wounded companions from the battlefield, and at Kenesaw Mountain was himself severely wounded in the head. He was brevetted Major for distinguished services; but in after life never permitted the title to be used in addressing him. There is a story that when the war was over he tossed up a coin to determine what should be his career. Whatever the determining auguries, he came at once to San Francisco to join his favorite brother Albert – there were ten brothers and sisters to choose from – and for a short time worked with him in the Mint; he soon began writing paragraphs for the weeklies, particularly the Argonaut and the News Letter.

"I was a slovenly writer in those days," he observes in a letter forty years later, "though enough better than my neighbors to have attracted my own attention. My knowledge of English was imperfect 'a whole lot.' Indeed, my intellectual status (whatever it may be, and God knows it's enough to make me blush) was of slow growth – as was my moral. I mean, I had not literary sincerity." Apparently, attention other than his own was attracted, for he was presently editing the News Letter.

In 1872 he went to London and for four years was on the staff of Fun. In London Bierce found congenial and stimulating associates. The great man of his circle was George Augustus Sala,

"one of the most skilful, finished journalists ever known," a keen satiric wit, and the author of a ballad of which it is said that Swift might have been proud. Another notable figure was Tom Hood the younger, mordantly humorous. The satiric style in journalism was popular then; and "personal" journals were so personal that one "Jimmy" Davis, editor of the Cuckoo and the Bat successively, found it healthful to remain some years in exile in France. Bierce contributed to several of these and to Figaro, the editor of which was James Mortimer. To this gentleman Bierce owed what he designated as the distinction of being "probably the only American journalist who was ever employed by an Empress in so congenial a pursuit as the pursuit of another journalist." This other journalist was M. Henri Rochefort, communard, formerly editor of La Lanterne in Paris, in which he had made incessant war upon the Empire and all its personnel, particularly the Empress. When, an exile, Rochefort announced his intention of renewing La Lanterne in London, the exiled Empress circumvented him by secretly copyrighting the title, The Lantern, and proceeding to publish a periodical under that name with the purpose of undermining his influence. Two numbers were enough; M. Rochefort fled to Belgium. Bierce said that in "the field of chromatic journalism" it was the finest thing that ever came from a press, but of the literary excellence of the twelve pages he felt less qualified for judgment as he had written every line.

This was in 1874. Two years earlier, under his journalistic pseudonym of "Dod Grile," he had published his first books – two

small volumes, largely made up of his articles in the San Francisco News Letter, called The Fiend's Delight, and Nuggets And Dust Panned Out In California. Now, he used the same pseudonym on the title-page of a third volume, Cobwebs from an Empty Skull. The Cobwebs were selections from his work in Fun— satirical tales and fables, often inspired by weird old woodcuts given him by the editors with the request that he write something to fit. His journalistic associates praised these volumes liberally, and a more distinguished admirer was Gladstone, who, discovering the Cobwebs in a second-hand bookshop, voiced his delight in their cleverness, and by his praise gave a certain currency to Bierce's name among the London elect. But despite so distinguished a sponsor, the books remained generally unknown.

Congenial tasks and association with the brilliant journalists of the day did not prevent Bierce from being undeniably hard up at times. In 1876 he returned to San Francisco, where he remained for twenty-one years, save for a brief but eventful career as general manager of a mining company near Deadwood, South Dakota. All this time he got his living by writing special articles – for the Wasp, a weekly whose general temper may be accurately surmised from its name, and, beginning in 1886, for the Examiner, in which he conducted every Sunday on the editorial page a department to which he gave the title he had used for a similar column in The Lantern – Prattle. A partial explanation of a mode of feeling and a choice of themes which Bierce developed more and more, ultimately to the practical

exclusion of all others, is to be found in the particular phase through which California journalism was just then passing.

In the evolution of the comic spirit the lowest stage, that of delight in inflicting pain on others, is clearly manifest in savages, small boys, and early American journalism. It was exhibited in all parts of America – Mark Twain gives a vivid example in his Journalistic Wild Oats of what it was in Tennessee – but with particular intensity in San Francisco. As a community, San Francisco exalted personal courage, directness of encounter, straight and effective shooting. The social group was so small and so homogeneous that any news of importance would be well known before it could be reported, set up in type, printed, and circulated. It was isolated by so great distances from the rest of the world that for years no pretense was made of furnishing adequate news from the outside. So the newspapers came to rely on other sorts of interest. They were pamphlets for the dissemination of the opinions of the groups controlling them, and weapons for doing battle, if need be, for those opinions. And there was abundant occasion: municipal affairs were corrupt, courts weak or venal, or both. Editors and readers enjoyed a good fight; they also wanted humorous entertainment; they happily combined the two. In the creative dawn of 1847 when the foundations of the journalistic earth were laid and those two morning stars, the Californian of Monterey and the California Star of San Francisco, sang together, we find the editors attacking the community generally, and each other particularly, with the utmost ferocity, laying about them

right and left with verbal broad-axes, crow-bars, and such other weapons as might be immediately at hand. The California Star's introduction to the public of what would, in our less direct day, be known as its "esteemed contemporary" is typical:

"We have received two late numbers of the Californian, a dim, dirty little paper printed in Monterey on the worn-out materials of one of the old California WAR PRESSES. It is published and edited by Walter Colton and Robert Semple, the one a WHINING SYCOPHANT, and the other an OVER-GROWN LICK-SPITTLE. At the top of one of the papers we find the words 'please exchange.' This would be considered in almost any other country a bare-faced attempt to swindle us. We should consider it so now were it not for the peculiar situation of our country which induces us to do a great deal for others in order for them to do us a little good... We have concluded to give our paper to them this year, so as to afford them some insight into the manner in which a Republican newspaper should be conducted. They appear now to be awfully verdant."

Down through the seventies and eighties the tradition persisted, newspapers being bought and read, as a historian of journalism asserts, not so much for news as to see who was getting "lambasted" that day. It is not strange, then, that journals of redoubtable pugnacity were popular, or that editors favored writers who were likely to excel in the gladiatorial style. It is significant that public praise first came to Bierce through his articles in the caustic News Letter, widely read on the Pacific

Coast during the seventies. Once launched in this line, he became locally famous for his fierce and witty articles in the Argonaut and the Wasp, and for many years his column Prattle in the Examiner was, in the words of Mr. Bailey Millard, "the most wickedly clever, the most audaciously personal, and the most eagerly devoured column of causerie that ever was printed in this country."

In 1896 Bierce was sent to Washington to fight, through the Hearst newspapers, the "refunding bill" which Collis P. Huntington was trying to get passed, releasing his Central Pacific Railroad from its obligations to the government. A year later he went again to Washington, where he remained during the rest of his journalistic career, as correspondent for the New York American, conducting also for some years a department in the Cosmopolitan.

Much of Bierce's best work was done in those years in San Francisco. Through the columns of the Wasp and the Examiner his wit played free; he wielded an extraordinary influence; his trenchant criticism made and unmade reputations – literary and otherwise. But this to Bierce was mostly "journalism, a thing so low that it cannot be mentioned in the same breath with literature." His real interest lay elsewhere. Throughout the early eighties he devoted himself to writing stories; all were rejected by the magazine editors to whom he offered them. When finally in 1890 he gathered these stories together into book form and offered them to the leading publishers of the country, they too, would have none of them. "These men," writes Mr. Bailey Millard, "admitted the

purity of his diction and the magic of his haunting power, but the stories were regarded as revolting."

At last, in 1891, his first book of stories, Tales of Soldiers and Civilians, saw the reluctant light of day. It had this for foreword:

"Denied existence by the chief publishing houses of the country, this book owes itself to Mr. E. L. G. Steele, merchant, of this city, [San Francisco]. In attesting Mr. Steele's faith in his judgment and his friend, it will serve its author's main and best ambition."

There is Biercean pugnacity in these words; the author flings down the gauntlet with a confident gesture. But it cannot be said that anything much happened to discomfit the publishing houses of little faith. Apparently, Bierce had thought to appeal past the dull and unjust verdict of such lower courts to the higher tribunal of the critics and possibly an elect group of general readers who might be expected to recognize and welcome something rare. But judgment was scarcely reversed. Only a few critics were discerning, and the book had no vogue. When The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter was published by F. J. Schulte and Company, Chicago, the next year, and Can Such Things Be by The Cassell Publishing Company, the year following, a few enthusiastic critics could find no words strong enough to describe Bierce's vivid imagination, his uncanny divination of atavistic terrors in man's consciousness, his chiseled perfection of style; but the critics who disapproved had even more trouble in finding words strong enough for their purposes and, as before, there was no general appreciation.

For the next twenty years Ambrose Bierce was a prolific writer but, whatever the reason, no further volumes of stories from his pen were presented to the world. Black Beetles in Amber, a collection of satiric verse, had appeared the same year as The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter; then for seven years, with the exception of a republication by G. P. Putnam's Sons of Tales of Soldiers and Civilians under the title, In the Midst of Life, no books by Bierce. In 1899 appeared Fantastic Fables; in 1903 Shapes of Clay, more satiric verse; in 1906 The Cynic's Word Book, a dictionary of wicked epigrams; in 1909 Write it Right, a blacklist of literary faults, and The Shadow on the Dial, a collection of essays covering, to quote from the preface of S. O. Howes, "a wide range of subjects, embracing among other things, government, dreams, writers of dialect and dogs" – Mr. Howes might have heightened his crescendo by adding "emancipated woman"; and finally – 1909 to 1912 —The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce, containing all his work previously published in book form, save the two last mentioned, and much more besides, all collected and edited by Bierce himself.

On October 2, 1913, Ambrose Bierce, having settled his business affairs, left Washington for a trip through the southern states, declaring in letters his purpose of going into Mexico and later on to South America. The fullest account of his trip and his plans is afforded by a newspaper clipping he sent his niece in a letter dated November 6, 1913; through the commonplaceness of the reportorial vocabulary shines out the vivid personality that was

making its final exit:

"Traveling over the same ground that he had covered with General Hazen's brigade during the Civil War, Ambrose Bierce, famed writer and noted critic, has arrived in New Orleans. Not that this city was one of the places figuring in his campaigns, for he was here after and not during the war. He has come to New Orleans in a haphazard, fancy-free way, making a trip toward Mexico. The places that he has visited on the way down have become famous in song and story – places where the greatest battles were fought, where the moon shone at night on the burial corps, and where in day the sun shone bright on polished bayonets and the smoke drifted upward from the cannon mouths.

"For Mr. Bierce was at Chickamauga; he was at Shiloh; at Murfreesboro; Kenesaw Mountain, Franklin and Nashville. And then when wounded during the Atlanta campaign he was invalided home. He 'has never amounted to much since then,' he said Saturday. But his stories of the great struggle, living as deathless characterizations of the bloody episodes, stand for what he 'has amounted to since then.'

"Perhaps it was in mourning for the dead over whose battlefields he has been wending his way toward New Orleans that Mr. Bierce was dressed in black. From head to foot he was attired in this color, except where the white cuffs and collar and shirt front showed through. He even carried a walking cane, black as ebony and unrelieved by gold or silver. But his eyes, blue and piercing as when they strove to see through the smoke at Chickamauga, retained

all the fire of the indomitable fighter.

"I'm on my way to Mexico, because I like the game,' he said, 'I like the fighting; I want to see it. And then I don't think Americans are as oppressed there as they say they are, and I want to get at the true facts of the case. Of course, I'm not going into the country if I find it unsafe for Americans to be there, but I want to take a trip diagonally across from northeast to southwest by horseback, and then take ship for South America, go over the Andes and across that continent, if possible, and come back to America again.

"There is no family that I have to take care of; I've retired from writing and I'm going to take a rest. No, my trip isn't for local color. I've retired just the same as a merchant or business man retires. I'm leaving the field for the younger authors.'

"An inquisitive question was interjected as to whether Mr. Bierce had acquired a competency only from his writings, but he did not take offense.

"My wants are few, and modest,' he said, 'and my royalties give me quite enough to live on. There isn't much that I need, and I spend my time in quiet travel. For the last five years I haven't done any writing. Don't you think that after a man has worked as long as I have that he deserves a rest? But perhaps after I have rested I might work some more – I can't tell, there are so many things – ' and the straightforward blue eyes took on a faraway look, 'there are so many things that might happen between now and when I come back. My trip might take several years, and I'm an old man now.'

"Except for the thick, snow-white hair no one would think him old. His hands are steady, and he stands up straight and tall – perhaps six feet."

In December of that same year the last letter he is known to have written was received by his daughter. It is dated from Chihuahua, and mentions casually that he has attached himself unofficially to a division of Villa's army, and speaks of a prospective advance on Ojinaga. No further word has ever come from or of Ambrose Bierce. Whether illness overtook him, then an old man of seventy-one, and death suddenly, or whether, preferring to go foaming over a precipice rather than to straggle out in sandy deltas, he deliberately went where he knew death was, no one can say. His last letters, dauntless, grave, tender, do not say, though they suggest much. "You must try to forgive my obstinacy in not 'perishing' where I am," he wrote as he left Washington. "I want to be where something worth while is going on, or where nothing whatever is going on." "Good-bye – if you hear of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags please know that I think that a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs. To be a Gringo in Mexico – ah, that is euthanasia!" Whatever end Ambrose Bierce found in Mexico, the lines of George Sterling well express what must have been his attitude in meeting it:

"Dream you he was afraid to live?"

Dream you he was afraid to die?

Or that, a suppliant of the sky,
He begged the gods to keep or give?
Not thus the shadow-maker stood,
Whose scrutiny dissolved so well
Our thin mirage of Heaven or Hell —
The doubtful evil, dubious good...

"If now his name be with the dead,
And where the gaunt agaves flow'r,
The vulture and the wolf devour
The lion-heart, the lion-head,
Be sure that heart and head were laid
In wisdom down, content to die;
Be sure he faced the Starless Sky
Unduped, unmurmuring, unafraid."

In any consideration of the work of Ambrose Bierce, a central question must be why it contains so much that is trivial or ephemeral. Another question facing every critic of Bierce, is why the fundamentally original point of view, the clarity of workmanship of his best things – mainly stories – did not win him immediate and general recognition.

A partial answer to both questions is to be found in a certain discord between Bierce and his setting. Bierce, paradoxically, combined the bizarre in substance, the severely restrained and compressed in form. An ironic mask covered a deep-seated sensibility; but sensibility and irony were alike subject to an uncompromising truthfulness; he would have given deep-throated

acclaim to Clough's

"But play no tricks upon thy soul, O man,
Let truth be truth, and life the thing it can."

He had the aristocrat's contempt for mass feeling, a selectiveness carried so far that he instinctively chose for themes the picked person and experience, the one decisive moment of crisis. He viewed his characters not in relation to other men and in normal activities; he isolated them – often amid abnormalities.

All this was in sharp contrast to the literary fashion obtaining when he dipped his pen to try his luck as a creative artist. The most popular novelist of the day was Dickens; the most popular poet, Tennyson. Neither looked straight at life; both veiled it: one in benevolence, the other in beauty. Direct and painful verities were best tolerated by the reading public when exhibited as instances of the workings of natural law. The spectator of the macrocosm in action could stomach the wanton destruction of a given human atom; one so privileged could and did excuse the Creator for small mistakes like harrying Hetty Sorrell to the gallow's foot, because of the conviction that, taking the Universe by and large, "He was a good fellow, and 'twould all be well." This benevolent optimism was the offspring of a strange pair, evangelicism and evolution; and in the minds of the great public whom Bierce, under other circumstances and with a slightly different mixture of qualities in himself, might have conquered, it became a large, soft insincerity

that demanded "happy endings," a profuse broadness of treatment prohibitive of harsh simplicity, a swathing of elemental emotion in gentility or moral edification.

But to Bierce's mind, "noble and nude and antique," this mid-Victorian draping and bedecking of "unpleasant truths" was abhorrent. Absolutely direct and unafraid – not only in his personal relations but, what is more rare, in his thinking – he regarded easy optimism, sure that God is in his heaven with consequently good effects upon the world, as blindness, and the hopefulness that demanded always the "happy ending," as silly. In many significant passages Bierce's attitude is the ironic one of Voltaire: "'Had not Pangloss got himself hanged,' replied Candide, 'he would have given us most excellent advice in this emergency; for he was a profound philosopher.'" Bierce did not fear to bring in disconcerting evidence that a priori reasoning may prove a not infallible guide, that causes do not always produce the effects complacently pre-argued, and that the notion of this as the best of all possible worlds is sometimes beside the point.

The themes permitted by such an attitude were certain to displease the readers of that period. In *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, his first book of stories, he looks squarely and grimly at one much bedecked subject of the time – war; not the fine gay gallantry of war, the music and the marching and the romantic episodes; but the ghastly horror of it; through his vivid, dramatic passages beats a hatred of war, not merely "unrighteous" war, but all war, the more disquieting because never allowed to become

articulate. With bitter but beautiful truth he brings each tale to its tragic close, always with one last turn of the screw, one unexpected horror more. And in this book – note the solemn implication of the title he later gave it, In the Midst of Life– as well as in the next, Can Such Things Be, is still another subject which Bierce alone in his generation seemed unafraid to consider curiously: "Death, in warfare and in the horrid guise of the supernatural, was painted over and over. Man's terror in the face of death gave the artist his cue for his wonderful physical and psychologic microscopies. You could not pin this work down as realism, or as romance; it was the greatest human drama – the conflict between life and death – fused through genius. Not Zola, in the endless pages of his Debâcle, not the great Tolstoi in his great War and Peace had ever painted war, horrid war, more faithfully than any of the stories of this book; not Maupassant had invented out of war's terrible truths more dramatically imagined plots... There painted an artist who had seen the thing itself, and being a genius, had made it an art still greater.

Death of the young, the beautiful, the brave, was the closing note of every line of the ten stories of war in this book. The brilliant, spectacular death that came to such senseless bravery as Tennyson hymned for the music-hall intelligence in his Charge of the Light Brigade; the vision-starting, slow, soul-drugging death by hanging; the multiplied, comprehensible death that makes rivers near battlefields run red; the death that comes by sheer terror; death actual and imagined – every sort of death was on these

pages, so painted as to make Pierre Loti's Book of Pity and Death seem but feeble fumbling."

Now death by the mid-Victorian was considered almost as undesirable an element in society as sex itself. Both must be passed over in silence or presented decently draped. In the eighties any writer who dealt unabashed with death was regarded as an unpleasant person. "Revolting!" cried the critics when they read Bierce's *Chickamauga* and *The Affair at Coulter's Notch*.

Bierce's style, too, by its very fineness, alienated his public. Superior, keen, perfect in detail, finite, compressed – such was his manner in the free and easy, prolix, rambling, multitudinous nineteenth century.

Bierce himself knew that although it is always the fashion to jeer at fashion, its rule is absolute for all that, whether it be fashion in boots or books.

"A correspondent of mine," he wrote in 1887 in his *Examiner* column, "a well-known and clever writer, appears surprised because I do not like the work of Robert Louis Stevenson. I am equally hurt to know that he does. If he was ever a boy he knows that the year is divided, not into seasons and months, as is vulgarly supposed, but into 'top time,' 'marble time,' 'kite time,' et cetera, and woe to the boy who ignores the unwritten calendar, amusing himself according to the dictates of an irresponsible conscience. I venture to remind my correspondent that a somewhat similar system obtains in matters of literature – a word which I beg him to observe means fiction. There are,

for illustration – or rather, there were – James time, Howells time, Crawford time, Russell time and Conway time, each epoch – named for the immortal novelist of the time being – lasting, generally speaking, as much as a year... All the more rigorous is the law of observance. It is not permitted to admire Jones in Smith time. I must point out to my heedless correspondent that this is not Stevenson time – that was last year." It was decidedly not Bierce time when Bierce's stories appeared.

And there was in him no compromise – or so he thought. "A great artist," he wrote to George Sterling, "is superior to his world and his time, or at least to his parish and his day." His practical application of that belief is shown in a letter to a magazine editor who had just rejected a satire he had submitted:

"Even you ask for literature – if my stories are literature, as you are good enough to imply. (By the way, all the leading publishers of the country turned down that book until they saw it published without them by a merchant in San Francisco and another sort of publishers in London, Leipsig and Paris.) Well, you wouldn't do a thing to one of my stories!

"No, thank you; if I have to write rot, I prefer to do it for the newspapers, which make no false pretenses and are frankly rotten, and in which the badness of a bad thing escapes detection or is forgotten as soon as it is cold.

"I know how to write a story (of 'happy ending' sort) for magazine readers for whom literature is too good, but I will not do so, so long as stealing is more honorable and interesting. I

have offered you ... the best that I am able to make; and now you must excuse me." In these two utterances we have some clue to the secret of his having ceased, in 1893, to publish stories. Vigorously refusing to yield in the slightest degree to the public so far as his stories were concerned, he abandoned his best field of creative effort and became almost exclusively a "columnist" and a satirist; he put his world to rout, and left his "parish and his day" resplendently the victors.

All this must not be taken to mean that the "form and pressure of the time" put into Bierce what was not there. Even in his creative work he had a satiric bent; his early training and associations, too, had been in journalistic satire. Under any circumstances he undoubtedly would have written satire – columns of it for his daily bread, books of it for self-expression; but under more favorable circumstances he would have kept on writing other sort of books as well. Lovers of literature may well lament that Bierce's insistence on going his way and the demands of his "parish" forced him to overdevelop one power to the almost complete paralysis of another and a perhaps finer.

As a satirist Bierce was the best America has produced, perhaps the best since Voltaire. But when he confined himself to "exploring the ways of hate as a form of creative energy," it was with a hurt in his soul, and with some intellectual and spiritual confusion. There resulted a kink in his nature, a contradiction that appears repeatedly, not only in his life, but in his writings. A striking instance is found in his article To Train a Writer:

"He should, for example, forget that he is an American and remember that he is a man. He should be neither Christian nor Jew, nor Buddhist, nor Mahometan, nor Snake Worshiper. To local standards of right and wrong he should be civilly indifferent. In the virtues, so-called, he should discern only the rough notes of a general expediency; in fixed moral principles only time-saving predecisions of cases not yet before the court of conscience. Happiness should disclose itself to his enlarging intelligence as the end and purpose of life; art and love as the only means to happiness. He should free himself of all doctrines, theories, etiquettes, politics, simplifying his life and mind, attaining clarity with breadth and unity with height. To him a continent should not seem wide nor a century long. And it would be needful that he know and have an ever-present consciousness that this is a world of fools and rogues, blind with superstition, tormented with envy, consumed with vanity, selfish, false, cruel, cursed with illusions – frothing mad!"

Up to that last sentence Ambrose Bierce beholds this world as one where tolerance, breadth of view, simplicity of life and mind, clear thinking, are at most attainable, at least worthy of the effort to attain; he regards life as purposive, as having happiness for its end, and art and love as the means to that good end. But suddenly the string from which he has been evoking these broad harmonies snaps with a snarl. All is evil and hopeless – "frothing mad." Both views cannot be held simultaneously by the same mind. Which

was the real belief of Ambrose Bierce? The former, it seems clear. But he has been hired to be a satirist.

On the original fabric of Bierce's mind the satiric strand has encroached more than the design allows. There results not only considerable obliteration of the main design, but confusion in the substituted one. For it is significant that much of the work of Bierce seems to be that of what he would have called a futilitarian, that he seldom seems able to find a suitable field for his satire, a foe man worthy of such perfect steel as he brings to the encounter; he fights on all fields, on both sides, against all comers; ubiquitous, indiscriminate, he is as one who screams in pain at his own futility, one who "might be heard," as he says of our civilization, "from afar in space as a scolding and a riot." That Bierce would have spent so much of his superb power on the trivial and the ephemeral, breaking magnificent vials of wrath on Oakland nobodies, preserving insignificant black beetles in the amber of his art, is not merely, as it has long been, cause of amazement to the critics; it is cause of laughter to the gods, and of weeping among Bierce's true admirers.

Some may argue that Bierce's failure to attain international or even national fame cannot be ascribed solely to a lack of concord between the man and his time and to the consequent reaction in him. It is true that in Bierce's work is a sort of paucity – not a mere lack of printed pages, but of the fulness of creative activity that makes Byron, for example, though vulgar and casual, a literary mountain peak. Bierce has but few themes, few moods; his literary

river runs clear and sparkling, but confined – a narrow current, not the opulent stream that waters wide plains of thought and feeling. Nor has Bierce the power to weave individual entities and situations into a broad pattern of existence, which is the distinguishing mark of such writers as Thackeray, Balzac, and Tolstoi among the great dead, and Bennett and Wells among the lesser living. Bierce's interest does not lie in the group experience nor even in the experience of the individual through a long period. His unit of time is the minute, not the month. It is significant that he never wrote a novel – unless The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter be reckoned one – and that he held remarkable views of the novel as a literary form, witness this passage from Prattle, written in 1887:

"English novelists are not great because the English novel is dead – deader than Queen Anne at her deadeast. The vein is worked out. It was a thin one and did not 'go down.' A single century from the time when Richardson sank the discovery shaft it had already begun to 'pinch out.' The miners of today have abandoned it altogether to search for 'pockets,' and some of the best of them are merely 'chloriding the dumps.' To expect another good novel in English is to expect the gold to 'grow' again."

It may well be that at the bottom of this sweeping condemnation was an instinctive recognition of his own lack of constructive power on a large scale.

But an artist, like a nation, should be judged not by what he

cannot do, but by what he can. That Bierce could not paint the large canvas does not make him negligible or even inconsiderable. He is by no means a second-rate writer; he is a first-rate writer who could not consistently show his first-rateness.

When he did show his first-rateness, what is it? In all his best work there is originality, a rare and precious idiosyncrasy; his point of view, his themes are rich with it. Above all writers Bierce can present – brilliantly present – startling fragments of life, carved out from attendant circumstance; isolated problems of character and action; sharply bitten etchings of individual men under momentary stresses and in bizarre situations. Through his prodigious emotional perceptivity he has the power of feeling and making us feel some strange, perverse accident of fate, destructive of the individual – of making us feel it to be real and terrible. This is not an easy thing to do. De Maupassant said that men were killed every year in Paris by the falling of tiles from the roof, but if he got rid of a principal character in that way, he should be hooted at. Bierce can make us accept as valid and tragic events more odd than the one de Maupassant had to reject. "In the line of the startling, – half Poe, half Merimee – he cannot have many superiors," says Arnold Bennett... "A story like An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge—well, Edgar Allan Poe might have deigned to sign it. And that is something.

"He possesses a remarkable style – what Kipling's would have been had Kipling been born with any significance of the word 'art' – and a quite strangely remarkable perception of beauty.

There is a feeling for landscape in A Horseman in the Sky which recalls the exquisite opening of that indifferent novel, Les Frères Zemganno by Edmond de Goncourt, and which no English novelist except Thomas Hardy, and possibly Charles Marriott, could match." The feeling for landscape which Bennett notes is but one part of a greater power – the power to make concrete and visible, action, person, place. Bierce's descriptions of Civil War battles in his Bits of Autobiography are the best descriptions of battle ever written. He lays out the field with map-like clearness, marshals men and events with precision and economy, but his account never becomes exposition – it is drama. Real battles move swiftly; accounts make them seem labored and slow. What narrator save Bierce can convey the sense of their being lightly swift, and, again and again the shock of surprise the event itself must have given?

This could not be were it not for his verbal restraint. In his descriptions is no welter of adjectives and adverbs; strong exact nouns and verbs do the work, and this means that the veritable object and action are brought forward, not qualifying talk around and about them. And this, again, could not be were it not for what is, beyond all others, his greatest quality – absolute precision. "I sometimes think," he once wrote playfully about letters of his having been misunderstood, "I sometimes think that I am the only man in the world who understands the meaning of the written word. Or the only one who does not." A reader of Ambrose Bierce comes almost to believe that not till now has he found

a writer who understands – completely – the meaning of the written word. He has the power to bring out new meanings in well-worn words, so setting them as to evoke brilliant significances never before revealed. He gives to one phrase the beauty, the compressed suggestion of a poem; his titles —Black Beetles in Amber, Ashes of the Beacon, Cobwebs from an Empty Skull are masterpieces in miniature. That he should have a gift of coining striking words naturally follows: in his later years he has fallen into his "anecdotalage," a certain Socialist is the greatest "futilitarian" of them all, "femininies" – and so on infinitely. Often the smaller the Biercean gem, the more exquisite the workmanship. One word has all the sparkle of an epigram.

In such skill Ambrose Bierce is not surpassed by any writer, ancient or modern; it gives him rank among the few masters who afford that highest form of intellectual delight, the immediate recognition of a clear idea perfectly set forth in fitting words – wit's twin brother, evoking that rare joy, the sudden, secret laughter of the mind. So much for Bierce the artist; the man is found in these letters. If further clue to the real nature of Ambrose Bierce were needed it is to be found in a conversation he had in his later years with a young girl: "You must be very proud, Mr. Bierce, of all your books and your fame?" "No," he answered rather sadly, "you will come to know that all that is worth while in life is the love you have had for a few people near to you."

A Memoir of Ambrose Bierce

by George Sterling

Though from boyhood a lover of tales of the terrible, it was not until my twenty-second year that I heard of Ambrose Bierce, I having then been for ten months a resident of Oakland, California. But in the fall of the year 1891 my friend Roosevelt Johnson, newly arrived from our town of birth, Sag Harbor, New York, asked me if I were acquainted with his work, adding that he had been told that Bierce was the author of stories not inferior in awesomeness to the most terrible of Poe's.

We made inquiry and found that Bierce had for several years been writing columns of critical comment, satirically named Prattle, for the editorial page of the Sunday Examiner, of San Francisco. As my uncle, of whose household I had been for nearly a year a member, did not subscribe to that journal, I had unfortunately overlooked these weekly contributions to the wit and sanity of our western literature – an omission for which we partially consoled ourselves by subsequently reading with great eagerness each installment of Prattle as it appeared. But, so far as his short stories were concerned, we had to content ourselves with the assurance of a neighbor that 'they'd scare an owl off a

tombstone."

However, later in the autumn, while making a pilgrimage to the home of our greatly worshipped Joaquin Miller, we became acquainted with Albert, an elder brother of Bierce's, a man who was to be one of my dearest of friends to the day of his death, in March, 1914. From him we obtained much to gratify our not unnatural curiosity as to this mysterious being, who, from his isolation on a lonely mountain above the Napa Valley, scattered weekly thunderbolts on the fool, the pretender, and the knave, and cast ridicule or censure on many that sat in the seats of the mighty. For none, however socially or financially powerful, was safe from the stab of that aculeate pen, the venom of whose ink is to gleam vividly from the pages of literature for centuries yet to come.

For Bierce is of the immortals. That fact, known, I think, to him, and seeming then more and more evident to some of his admirers, has become plainly apparent to anyone who can appraise the matter with eyes that see beyond the flimsy artifices that bulk so large and so briefly in the literary arena. Bierce was a sculptor who wrought in hardest crystal.

I was not to be so fortunate as to become acquainted with him until after the publication of his first volume of short stories, entitled *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. That mild title gives scant indication of the terrors that await the unwarned reader. I recall that I hung fascinated over the book, unable to lay it down until the last of its printed dooms had become an imperishable portion of the memory. The tales are told with a calmness and

reserve that make most of Poe's seem somewhat boyish and melodramatic by comparison. The greatest of them seems to me to be An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, though I am perennially charmed by the weird beauty of An Inhabitant of Carcosa, a tale of unique and unforgettable quality.

Bierce, born in Ohio in 1842, came to San Francisco soon after the close of the Civil War. It is amusing to learn that he was one of a family of eleven children, male and female, the Christian name of each of whom began with the letter "A!" Obtaining employment at first in the United States Mint, whither Albert, always his favorite brother, had preceded him, he soon gravitated to journalism, doing his first work on the San Francisco News Letter. His brother once told me that he (Ambrose) had from boyhood been eager to become a writer and was expectant of success at that pursuit.

Isolated from most men by the exalted and austere habit of his thought, Bierce finally suffered a corresponding exile of the body, and was forced to live in high altitudes, which of necessity are lonely. This latter banishment was on account of chronic and utterly incurable asthma, an ailment contracted in what might almost be termed a characteristic manner. Bierce had no fear of the dead folk and their marble city. From occasional strollings by night in Laurel Hill Cemetery, in San Francisco, his spirit "drank repose," and was able to attain a serenity in which the cares of daytime existence faded to nothingness. It was on one of those strolls that he elected to lie for awhile in the moonlight on a

flat tombstone, and awakening late in the night, found himself thoroughly chilled, and a subsequent victim of the disease that was to cast so dark a shadow over his following years. For his sufferings from asthma were terrible, arising often to a height that required that he be put under the influence of chloroform.

So afflicted, he found visits to the lowlands a thing not to be indulged in with impunity. For many years such trips terminated invariably in a severe attack of his ailment, and he was driven back to his heights shaken and harassed. But he found such visits both necessary and pleasant on occasion, and it was during one that he made in the summer of 1892 that I first made his acquaintance, while he was temporarily a guest at his brother Albert's camp on a rocky, laurel-covered knoll on the eastern shore of Lake Temescal, a spot now crossed by the tracks of the Oakland, Antioch and Eastern Railway.

I am not likely to forget his first night among us. A tent being, for his ailment, insufficiently ventilated, he decided to sleep by the campfire, and I, carried away by my youthful hero-worship, must partially gratify it by occupying the side of the fire opposite to him. I had a comfortable cot in my tent, and was unaccustomed at the time to sleeping on the ground, the consequence being that I awoke at least every half-hour. But awake as often as I might, always I found Bierce lying on his back in the dim light of the embers, his gaze fixed on the stars of the zenith. I shall not forget the gaze of those eyes, the most piercingly blue, under yellow shaggy brows, that I have ever seen.

After that, I saw him at his brother's home in Berkeley, at irregular intervals, and once paid him a visit at his own temporary home at Skylands, above Wrights, in Santa Clara County, whither he had moved from Howell Mountain, in Napa County. It was on this visit that I was emboldened to ask his opinion on certain verses of mine, the ambition to become a poet having infected me at the scandalously mature age of twenty-six. He was hospitable to my wish, and I was fortunate enough to be his pupil almost to the year of his going forth from among us. During the greater part of that time he was a resident of Washington, D. C., whither he had gone in behalf of the San Francisco Examiner, to aid in defeating (as was successfully accomplished) the Funding Bill proposed by the Southern Pacific Company. It was on this occasion that he electrified the Senate's committee by repeatedly refusing to shake the hand of the proponent of that measure, no less formidable an individual than Collis P. Huntington.

For Bierce carried into actual practice his convictions on ethical matters. Secure in his own self-respect, and valuing his friendship or approval to a high degree, he refused to make, as he put it, "a harlot of his friendship." Indeed, he once told me that it was his rule, on subsequently discovering the unworth of a person to whom a less fastidious friend had without previous warning introduced him, to write a letter to that person and assure him that he regarded the introduction as a mistake, and that the twain were thenceforth to "meet as strangers!" He also once informed me that he did not care to be introduced to persons whom he had criticized, or was

about to criticize, in print. "I might get to like the beggar," was his comment, "and then I'd have one less pelt in my collection."

In his criticism of my own work, he seldom used more than suggestion, realizing, no doubt, the sensitiveness of the tyro in poetry. It has been hinted to me that he laid, as it were, a hand of ice on my youthful enthusiasms, but that, to such extent as it may be true, was, I think, a good thing for a pupil of the art, youth being apt to gush and become over-sentimental. Most poets would give much to be able to obliterate some of their earlier work, and he must have saved me a major portion of such putative embarrassment. Reviewing the manuscripts that bear his marginal counsels, I can now see that such suggestions were all "indicated," though at the time I dissented from some of them. It was one of his tenets that a critic should "keep his heart out of his head" (to use his own words), when sitting in judgment on the work of writers whom he knew and liked. But I cannot but think that he was guilty of sad violations of that rule, especially in my own case.

Bierce lived many years in Washington before making a visit to his old home. That happened in 1910, in which year he visited me at Carmel, and we afterwards camped for several weeks together with his brother and nephew, in Yosemite. I grew to know him better in those days, and he found us hospitable, in the main degree, to his view of things, socialism being the only issue on which we were not in accord. It led to many warm arguments, which, as usual, conduced nowhere but to the suspicion that truth in such matters was mainly a question of taste.

I saw him again in the summer of 1911, which he spent at Sag Harbor. We were much on the water, guests of my uncle in his power-yacht "La Mascotte II." He was a devotee of canoeing, and made many trips on the warm and shallow bays of eastern Long Island, which he seemed to prefer to the less spacious reaches of the Potomac. He revisited California in the fall of the next year, a trip on which we saw him for the last time. An excursion to the Grand Canyon was occasionally proposed, but nothing came of it, nor did he consent to be again my guest at Carmel, on the rather surprising excuse that the village contained too many anarchists! And in November, 1913, I received my last letter from him, he being then in Laredo, Texas, about to cross the border into warring Mexico.

Why he should have gone forth on so hazardous an enterprise is for the most part a matter of conjecture. It may have been in the spirit of adventure, or out of boredom, or he may not, even, have been jesting when he wrote to an intimate friend that, ashamed of having lived so long, and not caring to end his life by his own hand, he was going across the border and let the Mexicans perform for him that service. But he wrote to others that he purposed to extend his pilgrimage as far as South America, to cross the Andes, and return to New York by way of a steamer from Buenos Ayres. At any rate, we know, from letters written during the winter months, that he had unofficially attached himself to a section of Villa's army, even taking an active part in the fighting. He was heard from until the close of 1913; after that date the mist closes in

upon his trail, and we are left to surmise what we may. Many rumors as to his fate have come out of Mexico, one of them even placing him in the trenches of Flanders. These rumors have been, so far as possible, investigated: all end in nothing. The only one that seems in the least degree illuminative is the tale brought by a veteran reporter from the City of Mexico, and published in the *San Francisco Bulletin*. It is the story of a soldier in Villa's army, one of a detachment that captured, near the village of Icamole, an ammunition train of the Carranzistas. One of the prisoners was a sturdy, white-haired, ruddy-faced Gringo, who, according to the tale, went before the firing squad with an Indian muleteer, as sole companion in misfortune. The description of the manner – indifferent, even contemptuous – with which the white-haired man met his death seems so characteristic of Bierce that one would almost be inclined to give credence to the tale, impossible though it may be of verification. But the date of the tragedy being given as late in 1915, it seems incredible that Bierce could have escaped observation for so long a period, with so many persons in Mexico eager to know of his fate. It is far more likely that he met his death at the hands of a roving band of outlaws or guerrilla soldiery.

I have had often in mind the vision of his capture by such a squad, their discovery of the considerable amount of gold coin that he was known to carry on his person, and his immediate condemnation and execution as a spy in order that they might retain possession of the booty. Naturally, such proceedings would not have been reported, from fear of the necessity of sharing

with those "higher up." And so the veil would have remained drawn, and impenetrable to vision. Through the efforts of the War Department, all United States Consuls were questioned as to Bierce's possible departure from the country; all Americans visiting or residing in Mexico were begged for information – even prospectors. But the story of the reporter is the sole one that seems partially credible. To such darkness did so shining and fearless a soul go forth.

It is now over eight years since that disappearance, and though the likelihood of his existence in the flesh seems faint indeed, the storm of detraction and obloquy that he always insisted would follow his demise has never broken, is not even on the horizon. Instead, he seems to be remembered with tolerance by even those whom he visited with a chastening pen. Each year of darkness but makes the star of his fame increase and brighten, but we have, I think, no full conception as yet of his greatness, no adequate realization of how wide and permanent a fame he has won. It is significant that some of the discerning admire him for one phase of his work, some for another. For instance, the clear-headed H. L. Mencken acclaims him as the first wit of America, but will have none of his tales; while others, somewhat disconcerted by the cynicism pervading much of his wit, place him among the foremost exponents of the art of the short story. Others again prefer his humor (for he was humorist as well as wit), and yet others like most the force, clarity and keen insight of his innumerable essays and briefer comments on mundane affairs.

Personally, I have always regarded Poe's Fall of the House of Usher as our greatest tale; close to that come, in my opinion, at least a dozen of Bierce's stories, whether of the soldier or civilian. He has himself stated in Prattle: "I am not a poet." And yet he wrote poetry, on occasion, of a high order, his Invocation being one of the noblest poems in the tongue. Some of his satirical verse seems to me as terrible in its withering invective as any that has been written by classic satirists, not excepting Juvenal and Swift. Like the victims of their merciless pens, his, too, will be forgiven and forgotten. Today no one knows, nor cares, whether or not those long-dead offenders gave just offense. The grave has closed over accuser and accused, and the only thing that matters is that a great mind was permitted to function. One may smile or sigh over the satire, but one must also realize that even the satirist had his own weaknesses, and could have been as savagely attacked by a mentality as keen as his own. Men as a whole will never greatly care for satire, each recognizing, true enough, glimpses of himself in the invective, but sensing as well its fundamental bias and cruelty. However, Bierce thought best of himself as a satirist.

Naturally, Bierce carried his wit and humor into his immediate human relationships. I best recall an occasion, when, in my first year of acquaintance with him, we were both guests at the home of the painter, J. H. E. Partington. It happened that a bowl of nasturtiums adorned the center table, and having been taught by Father Tabb, the poet, to relish that flower, I managed to consume most of them before the close of the evening, knowing there were

plenty more to be had in the garden outside. Someone at last remarked: "Why, George has eaten all the nasturtiums! Go out and bring some more." At which Bierce dryly and justly remarked: "No – bring some thistles!" It is an indication, however, of his real kindness of heart that, observing my confusion, he afterwards apologized to me for what he termed a thoughtless jest. It was, nevertheless, well deserved.

I recall even more distinctly a scene of another setting. This concerns itself with Bierce's son, Leigh, then a youth in the early twenties. At the time (circa 1894) I was a brother lodger with them in an Oakland apartment house. Young Bierce had contracted a liaison with a girl of his own age, and his father, determined to end the affair, had appointed an hour for discussion of the matter. The youth entered his father's rooms defiant and resolute: within an hour he appeared weeping, and cried out to me, waiting for him in his own room: "My father is a greater man than Christ! He has suffered more than Christ!" And the affair of the heart was promptly terminated.

One conversant with Bierce only as a controversialist and censor morum was, almost of necessity, constrained to imagine him a misanthrope, a soured and cynical recluse. Only when one was privileged to see him among his intimates could one obtain glimpses of his true nature, which was considerate, generous, even affectionate. Only the waving of the red flag of Socialism could rouse in him what seemed to us others a certain savageness of intolerance. Needless to say, we did not often invoke it, for he was

an ill man with whom to bandy words. It was my hope, at one time, to involve him and Jack London in a controversy on the subject, but London declined the oral encounter, preferring one with the written word. Nothing came of the plan, which is a pity, as each was a supreme exponent of his point of view. Bierce subsequently attended one of the midsummer encampments of the Bohemian Club, of which he was once the secretary, in their redwood grove near the Russian river. Hearing that London was present, he asked why they had not been mutually introduced, and I was forced to tell him that I feared that they'd be, verbally, at each other's throats, within an hour. "Nonsense!" exclaimed Bierce. "Bring him around! I'll treat him like a Dutch Uncle." He kept his word, and seemed as much attracted to London as London was to him. But I was always ill at ease when they were conversing. I do not think the two men ever met again.

Bierce was the cleanest man, personally, of whom I have knowledge – almost fanatically so, if such a thing be possible. Even during our weeks of camping in the Yosemite, he would spend two hours on his morning toilet in the privacy of his tent. His nephew always insisted that the time was devoted to shaving himself from face to foot! He was also a most modest man, and I still recall his decided objections to my bathing attire when at the swimming-pool of the Bohemian Club, in the Russian River. Compared to many of those visible, it seemed more than adequate; but he had another opinion of it. He was a good, even an eminent, tankard-man, and retained a clear judgment under

any amount of potatoes. He preferred wine (especially a dry vin du pays, usually a sauterne) to "hard likker," in this respect differing in taste from his elder brother. In the days when I first made his acquaintance, I was accustomed to roam the hills beyond Oakland and Berkeley from Cordonices Creek to Leona Heights, in company with Albert Bierce, his son Carlton, R. L. ("Dick") Partington, Leigh Bierce (Ambrose's surviving son) and other youths. On such occasions I sometimes hid a superfluous bottle of port or sherry in a convenient spot, and Bierce, afterwards accompanying us on several such outings, pretended to believe that I had such flagons concealed under each bush or rock in the reach and breadth of the hills, and would, to carry out the jest, hunt zealously in such recesses. I could wish that he were less often unsuccessful in the search, now that he has had "the coal-black wine" to drink.

Though an appreciable portion of his satire hints at misanthropy, Bierce, while profoundly a pessimist, was, by his own confession to me, "a lover of his country and his fellowmen," and was ever ready to proffer assistance in the time of need and sympathy in the hour of sorrow. His was a great and tender heart, and giving of it greatly, he expected, or rather hoped for, a return as great. It may have been by reason of the frustration of such hopes that he so often broke with old and, despite his doubts, appreciative friends. His brother Albert once told me that he (Ambrose) had never been "quite the same," after the wound in the head that he received in the battle of Kenesaw Mountain,

but had a tendency to become easily offended and to show that resentment. Such estrangements as he and his friends suffered are not, therefore, matters on which one should sit in judgment. It is sad to know that he went so gladly from life, grieved and disappointed. But the white flame of Art that he tended for nearly half a century was never permitted to grow faint nor smoky, and it burned to the last with a pure brilliance. Perhaps, he bore witness to what he had found most admirable and enduring in life in the following words, the conclusion of the finest of his essays:

"Literature and art are about all that the world really cares for in the end; those who make them are not without justification in regarding themselves as masters in the House of Life and all others as their servitors. In the babble and clamor, the pranks and antics of its countless incapables, the tremendous dignity of the profession of letters is overlooked; but when, casting a retrospective eye into 'the dark backward and abysm of time' to where beyond these voices is the peace of desolation, we note the majesty of the few immortals and compare them with the pygmy figures of their contemporary kings, warriors and men of action generally – when across the silent battle-fields and hushed fora where the dull destinies of nations were determined, nobody cares how, we hear

like ocean on a western beach

The surge and thunder of the Odyssey,

then we appraise literature at its true value, and how little worth while seems all else with which Man is pleased to occupy his fussy soul and futile hands!"

The Letters of Ambrose Bierce

*Angwin,
July 31,
1892.*

My dear Blanche,

You will not, I hope, mind my saying that the first part of your letter was so pleasing that it almost solved the disappointment created by the other part. For *that* is a bit discouraging. Let me explain.

You receive my suggestion about trying your hand * * * at writing, with assent and apparently pleasure. But, alas, not for love of the art, but for the purpose of helping God repair his botchwork world. You want to "reform things," poor girl – to rise and lay about you, slaying monsters and liberating captive maids. You would "help to alter for the better the position of working-women." You would be a missionary – and the rest of it. Perhaps I shall not make myself understood when I say that this discourages me; that in such aims (worthy as they are) I would do nothing to assist you; that such ambitions are not only impracticable but incompatible with the spirit that gives success in art; that such ends are a prostitution of art; that "helpful" writing is dull reading. If you had had more experience of life I should regard what you say as entirely conclusive against your

possession of any talent of a literary kind. But you are so young and untaught in that way – and I have the testimony of little felicities and purely literary touches (apparently unconscious) in your letters – perhaps your unschooled heart and hope should not be held as having spoken the conclusive word. But surely, my child – as surely as anything in mathematics – Art will laurel no brow having a divided allegiance. Love the world as much as you will, but serve it otherwise. The best service you can perform by writing is to write well with no care for anything but that. Plant and water and let God give the increase if he will, and to whom it shall please him.

Suppose your father were to "help working-women" by painting no pictures but such (of their ugly surroundings, say) as would incite them to help themselves, or others to help them. Suppose you should play no music but such as – but I need go no further. Literature (I don't mean journalism) is an *art*; – it is not a form of benevolence. It has nothing to do with "reform," and when used as a means of reform suffers accordingly and justly. Unless you can *feel* that way I cannot advise you to meddle with it.

It would be dishonest in me to accept your praise for what I wrote of the Homestead Works quarrel – unless you should praise it for being well written and true. I have no sympathies with that savage fight between the two kinds of rascals, and no desire to assist either – except to better hearts and manners. The love of truth is good enough motive for me when I write of my

fellowmen. I like many things in this world and a few persons – I like you, for example; but after they are served I have no love to waste upon the irreclaimable mass of brutality that we know as "mankind." Compassion, yes – I am sincerely sorry that they are brutes.

Yes, I wrote the article "The Human Liver." Your criticism is erroneous. My opportunities of knowing women's feelings toward Mrs. Grundy are better than yours. They hate her with a horrible antipathy; but they cower all the same. The fact that they are a part of her mitigates neither their hatred nor their fear.

* * *

After next Monday I shall probably be in St. Helena, but if you will be so good as still to write to me please address me here until I apprise you of my removal; for I shall intercept my letters at St. Helena, wherever addressed. And maybe you will write before Monday. I need not say how pleasant it is for me to hear from you. And I shall want to know what you think of what I say about your "spirit of reform."

How I should have liked to pass that Sunday in camp with you all. And to-day – I wonder if you are there to-day. I feel a peculiar affection for that place.

Please give my love to all your people, and forgive my intolerably long letters – or retaliate in kind.

*Sincerely your friend,
Ambrose Bierce.*

*St. Helena,
August 15,
1892.*

I know, dear Blanche, of the disagreement among men as to the nature and aims of literature; and the subject is too "long" to discuss. I will only say that it seems to me that men holding Tolstoi's view are not properly literary men (that is to say, artists) at all. They are "missionaries," who, in their zeal to lay about them, do not scruple to seize any weapon that they can lay their hands on; they would grab a crucifix to beat a dog. The dog is well beaten, no doubt (which makes him a worse dog than he was before) but note the condition of the crucifix! The work of these men is better, of course, than the work of men of truer art and inferior brains; but always you see the possibilities – possibilities to *them*– which they have missed or consciously sacrificed to their fad. And after all they do no good. The world does not wish to be helped. The poor wish only to be rich, which is impossible, not to be better. They would like to be rich in order to be worse, generally speaking. And your working woman (also generally speaking) does not wish to be virtuous; despite her insincere deprecation she would not let the existing system be altered if she could help it. Individual men and women can be assisted; and

happily some are worthy of assistance. No *class* of mankind, no tribe, no nation is worth the sacrifice of one good man or woman; for not only is their average worth low, but they like it that way; and in trying to help them you fail to help the good individuals. Your family, your immediate friends, will give you scope enough for all your benevolence. I must include *yourself*.

In timely illustration of some of this is an article by Ingersoll in the current *North American Review*— I shall send it you. It will be nothing new to you; the fate of the philanthropist who gives out of his brain and heart instead of his pocket — having nothing in that — is already known to you. It serves him richly right, too, for his low taste in loving. He who dilutes, spreads, subdivides, the love which naturally *all* belongs to his family and friends (if they are good) should not complain of non-appreciation. Love those, help those, whom from personal knowledge you know to be worthy. To love and help others is treason to *them*. But, bless my soul! I did not mean to say all this.

But while you seem clear as to your own art, you seem undecided as to the one you wish to take up. I know the strength and sweetness of the illusions (that is, *delusions*) that you are required to forego. I know the abysmal ignorance of the world and human character which, as a girl, you necessarily have. I know the charm that inheres in the beckoning of the Britomarts, as they lean out of their dream to persuade you to be as like them as is compatible with the fact that you exist. But I believe, too, that if you are set thinking — not reading — you will find the light.

You ask me of journalism. It is so low a thing that it *may* be legitimately used as a means of reform or a means of anything deemed worth accomplishing. It is not an art; art, except in the greatest moderation, is damaging to it. The man who can write well must not write as well as he can; the others may, of course. Journalism has many purposes, and the people's welfare *may* be one of them; though that is not the purpose-in-chief, by much.

I don't mind your irony about my looking upon the unfortunate as merely "literary material." It is true in so far as I consider them *with reference to literature*. Possibly I might be willing to help them otherwise – as your father might be willing to help a beggar with money, who is not picturesque enough to go into a picture. As you might be willing to give a tramp a dinner, yet unwilling to play "The Sweet Bye-and-Bye," or "Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay," to tickle his ear.

You call me "master." Well, it is pleasant to think of you as a pupil, but – you know the young squire had to watch his arms all night before the day of his accolade and investiture with knighthood. I think I'll ask you to contemplate yours a little longer before donning them – not by way of penance but instruction and consecration. When you are quite sure of the nature of your *call* to write – quite sure that it is *not* the voice of "duty" – then let me do you such slight, poor service as my limitations and the injunctions of circumstance permit. In a few ways I can help you.

* * *

Since coming here I have been ill all the time, but it seems my duty to remain as long as there is a hope that I *can* remain. If I get free from my disorder and the fear of it I shall go down to San Francisco some day and then try to see your people and mine. Perhaps you would help me to find my brother's new house – if he is living in it.

With sincere regards to all your family, I am most truly your friend, Ambrose Bierce.

Your letters are very pleasing to me. I think it nice of you to write them.

*St. Helena,
August 17,
1892.*

Dear Blanche,

It was not that I forgot to mail you the magazine that I mentioned; I could not find it; but now I send it.

My health is bad again, and I fear that I shall have to abandon my experiment of living here, and go back to the mountain – or some mountain. But not directly.

You asked me what books would be useful to you – I'm assuming that you've repented your sacrilegious attitude toward

literature, and will endeavor to thrust your pretty head into the crown of martyrdom otherwise. I may mention a few from time to time as they occur to me. There is a little book entitled (I think) simply "English Composition." It is by Prof. John Nichol – elementary, in a few places erroneous, but on the whole rather better than the ruck of books on the same subject.

Read those of Landor's "Imaginary Conversations" which relate to literature.

Read Longinus, Herbert Spencer on Style, Pope's "Essay on Criticism" (don't groan – the detractors of Pope are not always to have things their own way), Lucian on the writing of history – though you need not write history. Read poor old obsolete Kames' notions; some of them are not half bad. Read Burke "On the Sublime and Beautiful."

Read – but that will do at present. And as you read don't forget that the rules of the literary art are deduced from the work of the masters who wrote in ignorance of them or in unconsciousness of them. That fixes their value; it is secondary to that of *natural* qualifications. None the less, it is considerable. Doubtless you have read many – perhaps most – of these things, but to read them with a view to profit *as a writer* may be different. If I could get to San Francisco I could dig out of those artificial memories, the catalogues of the libraries, a lot of titles additional – and get you the books, too. But I've a bad memory, and am out of the Book Belt.

I wish you would write some little thing and send it me for

examination. I shall not judge it harshly, for this I *know*: the good writer (supposing him to be born to the trade) is not made by reading, but by observing and experiencing. You have lived so little, seen so little, that your range will necessarily be narrow, but within its lines I know no reason why you should not do good work. But it is all conjectural – you may fail. Would it hurt if I should tell you that I thought you had failed? Your absolute and complete failure would not affect in the slightest my admiration of your intellect. I have always half suspected that it is only second rate minds, and minds below the second rate, that hold their cleverness by so precarious a tenure that they can detach it for display in words.

God bless you, A. B.

*St. Helena,
August 28,
1892.*

My dear Blanche,

I positively shall not bore you with an interminated screed this time. But I thought you might like to know that I have recovered my health, and hope to be able to remain here for a few months at least. And if I remain well long enough to make me reckless I shall visit your town some day, and maybe ask your mother to command you to let me drive you to Berkeley. It makes me almost sad to think of the camp at the lake being abandoned.

So you liked my remarks on the "labor question." That is nice of you, but aren't you afraid your praise will get me into the disastrous literary habit of writing for some *one* pair of eyes? – your eyes? Or in resisting the temptation I may go too far in the opposite error. But you do not see that it is "Art for Art's sake" – hateful phrase! Certainly not, it is not Art at all. Do you forget the distinction I pointed out between journalism and literature? Do you not remember that I told you that the former was of so little value that it might be used for anything? My newspaper work is in *no* sense literature. It is nothing, and only becomes something when I give it the very use to which I would put nothing literary. (Of course I refer to my editorial and topical work.)

If you want to learn to write that kind of thing, so as to do good with it, you've an easy task. *Only* it is not worth learning and the good that you can do with it is not worth doing. But literature – the desire to do good with *that* will not help you to your means. It is not a sufficient incentive. The Muse will not meet you if you have any work for her to do. Of course I sometimes like to do good – who does not? And sometimes I am glad that access to a great number of minds every week gives me an opportunity. But, thank Heaven, I don't make a business of it, nor use in it a tool so delicate as to be ruined by the service.

Please do not hesitate to send me anything that you may be willing to write. If you try to make it perfect before you let me see it, it will never come. My remarks about the kind of mind which holds its thoughts and feelings by so precarious a tenure

that they are detachable for use by others were not made with a forethought of your failure.

Mr. Harte of the New England Magazine seems to want me to know his work (I asked to) and sends me a lot of it cut from the magazine. I pass it on to you, and most of it is just and true.

But I'm making another long letter.

I wish I were not an infidel – so that I could say: "God bless you," and mean it literally. I wish there *were* a God to bless you, and that He had nothing else to do.

Please let me hear from you. Sincerely, A. B.

St. Helena,

September 28,

1892.

My dear Blanche,

I have been waiting for a full hour of leisure to write you a letter, but I shall never get it, and so I'll write you anyhow. Come to think of it, there is nothing to say – nothing that *needs* be said, rather, for there is always so much that one would like to say to you, best and most patient of *sayees*.

I'm sending you and your father copies of my book. Not that I think you (either of you) will care for that sort of thing, but merely because your father is my co-sinner in making the book, and you in sitting by and diverting my mind from the proof-sheets of a part of it. Your part, therefore, in the work is the typographical errors. So you are in literature in spite of yourself.

I appreciate what you write of my girl. She is the best of girls to me, but God knoweth I'm not a proper person to direct her way of life. However, it will not be for long. A dear friend of mine – the widow of another dear friend – in London wants her, and means to come out here next spring and try to persuade me to let her have her – for a time at least. It is likely that I shall. My friend is wealthy, childless and devoted to both my children. I wish that in the meantime she (the girl) could have the advantage of association with *you*.

Please say to your father that I have his verses, which I promise myself pleasure in reading.

You appear to have given up your ambition to "write things." I'm sorry, for "lots" of reasons – not the least being the selfish one that I fear I shall be deprived of a reason for writing you long dull letters. Won't you *play* at writing things?

My (and Danziger's) book, "The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter," is to be out next month. The Publisher – I like to write it with a reverent capital letter – is unprofessional enough to tell me that he regards it as the very best piece of English composition that he ever saw, and he means to make the world know it. Now let the great English classics hide their diminished heads and pale their ineffectual fires!

So you begin to suspect that books do not give you the truth of life and character. Well, that suspicion is the beginning of wisdom, and, so far as it goes, a preliminary qualification for writing – books. Men and women are certainly not what books

represent them to be, nor what *they* represent – and sometimes believe – themselves to be. They are better, they are worse, and far more interesting.

With best regards to all your people, and in the hope that we may frequently hear from you, I am very sincerely your friend,
Ambrose Bierce.

Both the children send their *love* to you. And they mean just that.

St. Helena,
October 6,
1892.

My dear Blanche,

I send you by this mail the current *New England Magazine*— merely because I have it by me and have read all of it that I shall have leisure to read. Maybe it will entertain you for an idle hour.

I have so far recovered my health that I hope to do a little pot-boiling to-morrow. (Is that properly written with a hyphen? – for the life o' me I can't say, just at this moment. There is a story of an old actor who having played one part half his life had to cut out the name of the person he represented wherever it occurred in his lines: he could never remember which syllable to accent.) My illness was only asthma, which, unluckily, does not kill me and so should not alarm my friends.

Dr. Danziger writes that he has ordered your father's sketch

sent me. And I've ordered a large number of extra impressions of it – if it is still on the stone. So you see I like it.

Let me hear from you and about you.

Sincerely your friend,

I enclose Bib. Ambrose Bierce.

St. Helena,

October 7,

1892.

Dear Mr. Partington,

I've been too ill all the week to write you of your manuscripts, or even read them understandingly.

I think "Honest Andrew's Prayer" far and away the best. *It* is witty – the others hardly more than earnest, and not, in my judgment, altogether fair. But then you know you and I would hardly be likely to agree on a point of that kind, – I refuse my sympathies in some directions where I extend my sympathy – if that is intelligible. You, I think, have broader sympathies than mine – are not only sorry for the Homestead strikers (for example) but approve them. I do not. But we are one in detesting their oppressor, the smug-wump, Carnegie.

If you had not sent "Honest Andrew's Prayer" elsewhere I should try to place it here. It is so good that I hope to see it in print. If it is rejected please let me have it again if the incident is not then ancient history.

I'm glad you like some things in my book. But you should not condemn me for debasing my poetry with abuse; you should commend me for elevating my abuse with a little poetry, here and there. I am not a poet, but an abuser – that makes all the difference. It is "how you look at it."

But I'm still too ill to write. With best regards to all your family, I am sincerely yours, Ambrose Bierce.

I've been reading your pamphlet on Art Education. You write best when you write most seriously – and your best is very good.

*St. Helena,
October 15,
1892.*

Dear Blanche,

I send you this picture in exchange for the one that you have – I'm "redeeming" all those with these. But I asked you to return that a long time ago. Please say if you like this; to me it looks like a dude. But I hate the other – the style of it.

It is very good of your father to take so much trouble as to go over and work on that stone. I want the pictures – lithographs – only for economy: so that when persons for whom I do not particularly care want pictures of me I need not bankrupt myself in orders to the photographer. And I do not like photographs anyhow. How long, O Lord, how long am I to wait for that sketch of *you*?

My dear girl, I do not see that folk like your father and

me have any just cause of complaint against an unappreciative world; nobody compels us to make things that the world does not want. We merely choose to because the pay, *plus* the satisfaction, exceeds the pay alone that we get from work that the world does want. Then where is our grievance? We get what we prefer when we do good work; for the lesser wage we do easier work. It has never seemed to me that the "unappreciated genius" had a good case to go into court with, and I think he should be promptly non-suited. Inspiration from Heaven is all very fine – the mandate of an attitude or an instinct is good; but when A works for B, yet insists on taking his orders from C, what can he expect? So don't distress your good little heart with compassion – not for me, at least; whenever I tire of pot-boiling, wood-chopping is open to me, and a thousand other honest and profitable employments.

I have noted Gertrude's picture in the Examiner with a peculiar interest. That girl has a bushel of brains, and her father and brother have to look out for her or she will leave them out of sight. I would suggest as a measure of precaution against so monstrous a perversion of natural order that she have her eyes put out. The subjection of women must be maintained.

* * *

Bib and Leigh send love to you. Leigh, I think, is expecting Carl. I've permitted Leigh to join the band again, and he is very peacocky in his uniform. God bless you. Ambrose Bierce.

St. Helena,
November 6,
1892.

My dear Blanche,

I am glad you will consent to tolerate the new photograph – all my other friends are desperately delighted with it. I prefer your tolerance.

But I don't like to hear that you have been "ill and blue"; that is a condition which seems more naturally to appertain to me. For, after all, whatever cause you may have for "blueness," you can always recollect that you are *you*, and find a wholesome satisfaction in your identity; whereas I, alas, am *I*!

I'm sure you performed your part of that concert creditably despite the ailing wrist, and wish that I might have added myself to your triumph.

I have been very ill again but hope to get away from here (back to my mountain) before it is time for another attack from my friend the enemy. I shall expect to see you there sometime when my brother and his wife come up. They would hardly dare to come without you.

No, I did not read the criticism you mention – in the *Saturday Review*. Shall send you all the *Saturdays* that I get if you will have them. Anyhow, they will amuse (and sometimes disgust) your father.

I have awful arrears of correspondence, as usual.

The children send love. They had a pleasant visit with Carl, and we hope he will come again.

May God be very good to you and put it into your heart to write to your uncle often.

Please give my best respects to all Partingtons, jointly and severally. Ambrose Bierce.

*Angwin,
November 29,
1892.*

Dear Blanche,

Only just a word to say that I have repented of my assent to your well-meant proposal for your father to write of *me*. If there is anything in my work in letters that engages his interest, or in my *literary* history – that is well enough, and I shall not mind. But "biography" in the other sense is distasteful to me. I never read biographical "stuff" of other writers – of course you know "stuff" is literary slang for "matter" – and think it "beside the question." Moreover, it is distinctly mischievous to letters. It throws no light on one's work, but on the contrary "darkens counsel." The only reason that posterity judges work with some slight approach to accuracy is that posterity knows less, and cares less, about the author's personality. It considers his work as impartially as if it had found it lying on the ground with no footprints about it and no initials on its linen.

My brother is not "fully cognizant" of my history, anyhow –

not of the part that is interesting.

So, on the whole, I'll ask that it be not done. It was only my wish to please that made me consent. That wish is no weaker now, but I would rather please otherwise.

I trust that you arrived safe and well, and that your memory of those few stormy days is not altogether disagreeable. Sincerely your friend, Ambrose Bierce.

*Angwin,
December 25,
1892.*

My dear Blanche,

Returning here from the city this morning, I find your letter. And I had not replied to your last one before that! But *that* was because I hoped to see you at your home. I was unable to do so – I saw no one (but Richard) whom I really wanted to see, and had not an hour unoccupied by work or "business" until this morning. And then – it was Christmas, and my right to act as skeleton at anybody's feast by even so much as a brief call was not clear. I hope my brother will be as forgiving as I know you will be.

When I went down I was just recovering from as severe an attack of illness as I ever had in my life. Please consider unsaid all that I have said in praise of this mountain, its air, water, and everything that is its.

* * *

It was uncommonly nice of Hume to entertain so good an opinion of me; if you had seen him a few days later you would have found a different state of affairs, probably; for I had been exhausting relays of vials of wrath upon him for delinquent diligence in securing copyright for my little story – whereby it is uncopyrighted. I ought to add that he has tried to make reparation, and is apparently contrite to the limit of his penitential capacity.

No, there was no other foundation for the little story than its obvious naturalness and consistency with the sentiments "appropriate to the season." When Christendom is guzzling and gorging and clowning it has not time to cease being cruel; all it can do is to augment its hypocrisy a trifle.

Please don't lash yourself and do various penances any more for your part in the plaguing of poor Russell; he is quite forgotten in the superior affliction sent upon James Whitcomb Riley. *That* seems a matter of genuine public concern, if I may judge by what I heard in town (and I heard little else) and by my letters and "esteemed" (though testy) "contemporaries." Dear, dear, how sensitive people are becoming!

Richard has promised me the Blanchescape that I have so patiently waited for while you were practicing the art of looking pretty in preparation for the sitting, so now I am happy. I shall

put you opposite Joaquin Miller, who is now framed and glazed in good shape. I have also your father's sketch of me – that is, I got it and left it in San Francisco to be cleaned if possible; it was in a most unregenerate state of dirt and grease.

Seeing Harry Bigelow's article in the *Wave* on women who write (and it's unpleasantly near to the truth of the matter) I feel almost reconciled to the failure of my gorgeous dream of making a writer of *you*. I wonder if you would have eschewed the harmless, necessary tub and danced upon the broken bones of the innocuous toothbrush. Fancy you with sable nails and a soiled cheek, uttering to the day what God taught in the night! Let us be thankful that the peril is past.

The next time I go to "the Bay" I shall go to 1019 *first*.
God bless you for a good girl. Ambrose Bierce.

[First part of this letter missing.]

* * *

Yes, I know Blackburn Harte has a weakness for the proletariat of letters * * * and doubtless thinks Riley good *because* he is "of the people," people. But he will have to endure me as well as he can. You ask my opinion of Burns. He has not, I think, been translated into English, and I do not (that is, I can but *will* not) read that gibberish. I read Burns once – that was once too many times; but happily it was before I knew any better, and

so my time, being worthless, was not wasted.

I wish you could be up here this beautiful weather. But I dare say it would rain if you came. In truth, it is "thickening" a trifle just because of my wish. And I wish I *had* given you, for your father, all the facts of my biography from the cradle – downward. When you come again I shall, if you still want them. For I'm worried half to death with requests for them, and when I refuse am no doubt considered surly or worse. And my refusal no longer serves, for the biography men are beginning to write my history from imagination. So the next time I see you I shall give you (orally) that "history of a crime," my life. Then, if your father is still in the notion, he can write it from your notes, and I can answer all future inquiries by enclosing his article.

Do you know? – you will, I think, be glad to know – that I have many more offers for stories at good prices, than I have the health to accept. (For I am less nearly well than I have told you.) Even the *Examiner* has "waked up" (I woke it up) to the situation, and now pays me \$20 a thousand words; and my latest offer from New York is \$50.

I hardly know why I tell you this unless it is because you tell me of any good fortune that comes to your people, and because you seem to take an interest in my affairs such as nobody else does in just the same unobjectionable and, in fact, agreeable way. I wish you were my "real, sure-enough" niece. But in that case I should expect you to pass all your time at Howell Mountain, with your uncle and cousin. Then I should teach you to write, and you

could expound to me the principles underlying the art of being the best girl in the world. Sincerely yours, Ambrose Bierce.

*Angwin,
January 4,
1893.*

My dear Blanche,

Not hearing from [you] after writing you last week, I fear you are ill – may I not know? I am myself ill, as I feared. On Thursday last I was taken violently ill indeed, and have but just got about. In truth, I'm hardly able to write you, but as I have to go to work on Friday, *sure*, I may as well practice a little on you. And the weather up here is Paradisaical. Leigh and I took a walk this morning in the woods. We scared up a wild deer, but I did not feel able to run it down and present you with its antlers.

I hope you are well, that you are all well. And I hope Heaven will put it into your good brother's heart to send me that picture of the sister who is so much too good for him – or anybody.

In the meantime, and always, God bless you. Ambrose Bierce.

My boy (who has been an angel of goodness to me in my illness) sends his love to you and all your people.

*Angwin, Cal.,
January 14,
1893.*

My dear Partington,

You see the matter is this way. You can't come up here and go back the same day – at least that would give you but about an hour here. You must remain over night. Now I put it to you – how do you think I'd feel if you came and remained over night and I, having work to do, should have to leave you to your own devices, mooning about a place that has nobody to talk to? When a fellow comes a long way to see me I want to see a good deal of him, however *he* may feel about it. It is not the same as if he lived in the same bailiwick and "dropped in." That is why, in the present state of my health and work, I ask all my friends to give me as long notice of their coming as possible. I'm sure you'll say I am right, inasmuch as certain work if undertaken must be done by the time agreed upon.

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