

AMBROSE BIERCE: THE DEVIL TAKES A HOLIDAY

by

Joan B. Barriga
21425 Shady Lane
Los Gatos, CA. 95030
Telephone (408) 353-2546

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INTRODUCTION

Writing about Ambrose Bierce is like trying to hit a moving target. Just when he seems to be fixed in the cross-hairs, he disappears. His whole life was a blur of movement: from a Midwestern farm, to the Southern states during the Civil War, then cross-country to San Francisco several times, back to the East, another trip to California -- on and on it goes. Even his final disappearance left people wondering whether he might not turn up unexpectedly again. They were so uncertain as to his whereabouts that his birth and death dates are still written "1842 - 1914 (?)".

After Bierce disappeared and a suitable interval had passed -- to be sure that he wouldn't reappear and embarrass his biographers -- a number of theories about his final resting place began to surface; (1) he went to Mexico as a government agent-- or joined up with Villa's revolutionary army and was shot as a spy; (2) he went to France to become an officer on Lord Kitchener's staff; (3) he picked out a spot in the Grand Canyon and committed suicide; (4) he went to South America; (5) he ended up in the State Insane Asylum at Napa. One frustrated investigator came to the conclusion that no such person as Ambrose Bierce ever really existed.

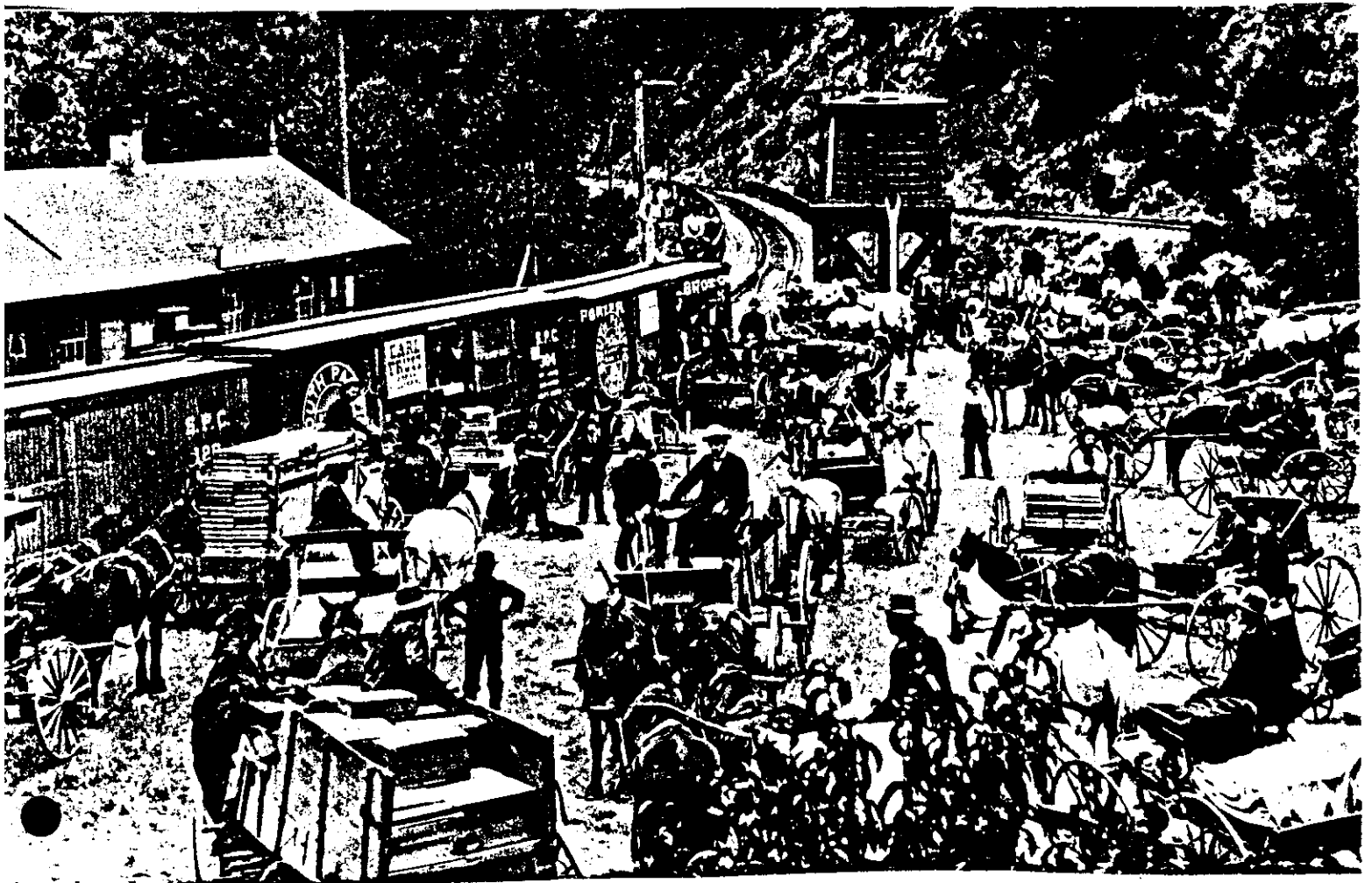
Since there have been so many books written about the mysterious end of Bierce's life, it might be more useful to focus on what occurred during his life

that produced the kind of person he became; cynical, authoritarian, excruciatingly funny, tender-hearted, vindictive, explosive, brooding -- the moving target again. Since Bierce refused to give out any biographical information about himself, his life became almost as mysterious as his disappearance; and that was the way he wanted it. Although he wrote newspaper columns and short stories, and kept his name before the public, he never revealed his private self in his writings.

There was a brief period in his life, however, when he paused , laid down his barbed pen, and seemed almost content to stay where he was. This was when he came to Wright's Station in the Santa Cruz Mountains. He was away from the pressures of deadlines and from the persistent people who annoyed him and consumed his time. He was free to select his companions and take the time to reflect about where he had been and where he was going. Never again, in the time remaining to him, would he have this luxury.

The human race was to Bierce an incredible mixture of the macabre and the comic, to judge from his writings. He watched and absorbed their activities, then stood aside to enjoy, as Bertha Clark Pope put it, "...the sudden secret laughter of the mind."

WRIGHT'S STATION IN THE 1880's



AMBROSE BIERCE: THE DEVIL TAKES A HOLIDAY

Just off Summit Road in the Santa Cruz Mountains you can look in vain for the once-lively fruit shipping center of Wright's Station. Only a railroad abutment and bridge remain -- no buildings. Squire's Merchandise store is gone; the train depot, Matty's hotel, Castle's Tunnel saloon, Sunset Park, the school, all gone. It's difficult to imagine the bustle of activity that occurred when the narrow gauge train pulled into the depot and passengers were met by carriages waiting to take them to the summer resorts. They had their choice of a variety of places to vacation -- the Woodwardia, Hotel de Redwood, the Edgemont, the Summit Hotel, the "Bohemia", and the Jeffreys Hotel. The latter two were located on Loma Prieta Avenue, locally known as "Whitewash Alley" because of the neat white picket fences along the road. "Bohemia", run by the Cotton family, was at the lower end of the road, and was well-known to city visitors who appreciated the scenery, the good cooking, and the opportunity to hobnob with bon vivants and celebrities, such as Jack London. A bit farther up the road was the smaller Jeffreys Hotel, with its collection of small private cottages tucked away among the redwoods.

On a bright October afternoon in 1897 the Jeffreys Hotel was the destination of one traveler, a tall, rather thin man of fifty-five with a distinguished military bearing. His piercing blue eyes took in the surrounding redwood forest, the lush greenness of the creek canyon, the ruggedness of the mountains, and he

seemed satisfied. A.G. ("Almighty God", as one disgruntled journalist called him) Bierce had arrived. He was at the peak of his fame as a journalist and satirist, having spent the past year in Washington, D.C., representing William R. Hearst's San Francisco Examiner in its battle with the Southern Pacific Railroad, in the person of Collis Huntington. Bierce didn't come to Wright's as a vacationer; he came, as did many others, as a health-seeker, hoping to find relief from a long-standing problem with asthma. He was a wanderer, continually changing his residence, continually seeking the perfect climate, the perfect people, and, of course, he was continually disappointed.

Once settled in his small cottage at the Jeffreys, he had ample time to review the course of events that had led him from Horse Cave Creek, Ohio, to Wright's, California. He was the tenth of the thirteen children born to Marcus Aurelius Bierce and his wife Laura Sherwood. Names appeared to have a fascination for these parents -- they gave every child a first name beginning with "A"-- Abigail, Amelia, Ann Maria, Addison, Aurelius, Augustus (who weighed 300 pounds as an adult and hired on as the strong man with a traveling circus), Almeda, and Andrew--sourly regarded by his brother as the "favorite son". Albert, affectionate and even-tempered, was next and the only member of the family who had a close relationship with Ambrose. The last three children, Arthur and twins Adelia and Aurelia, died in early childhood. The parents were strict Congregationalists and tried to bring up their children according to their strong religious convictions. For the most part they succeeded, except with Ambrose, a rebellious loner, who left the family home (now near Warsaw, Indiana) at seventeen, and, thanks to the largesse of Uncle Lucius (six-time mayor of Akron, Ohio) spent two terms at the Kentucky Military Institute.

The military life appealed to Ambrose, especially when he left its structured

AMBROSE BIERCE AND PARENTS



MARCUS AURELIUS BIERCE



LAURA SHERWOOD BIERCE



LT. AMBROSE GWINNETT BIERCE...1862

world to find work in an Elkhart, Indiana, grocery-saloon and then at the brick-yard. Fortunately, at least to his way of thinking, the Civil War provided an escape from this drudgery. He was the second in his county to enlist in the 9th. Regiment, Co. C., of the Indiana Volunteers, on April 19, 1861.

The Civil War proved to be the high point in Bierce's life. It forever after influenced his thinking, his behavior, and his writing, as later shown in the compelling tales, "Soldiers and Civilians". The Indiana 9th. went from the battle of Philippi to the Cheat River, where Bierce distinguished himself by rescuing a fellow soldier under fire. Gen. Nelson called them "the Bloody 9th." and said, "the boys can steal, dress, and eat a hog, while on march, without breaking ranks."¹ Brother Albert meanwhile had joined up with the 18th. Battalion of Ohio and met up with Ambrose, who was now a 2nd. Lieutenant, at the battle of Chickamauga in December 1862. By June 1864 the troops were at Kenesaw Mountain, and it was here that Ambrose received a severe head wound. He was left lying untended on the battlefield and might very probably have died if he hadn't finally been carried to Albert's tent where he was cared for. After a brief furlough at home he rejoined his company, although he was not completely recovered, and had fainting spells when he got overly tired or stressed.

Bierce became a civilian in January 1865 and served as an agent for the Treasury Department, overseeing the sale of cotton to the government for several months, until he was asked to join Gen. Hazen's expedition west as an engineering attaché. He had done topographical mapping for him during the war, and was promised a promotion to the rank of captain when they reached San Francisco. Unfortunately, when they arrived, the promotion turned out to be a 1st. Lieutenancy, and Bierce quit the military life in disgust. He was later given the rank of Brevet Major, a title he refused to use, although it later gained him access to the Army

and Navy Club in Washington, where he spent many pleasant hours refighting old battles and analyzing military strategy.

Alone and jobless in San Francisco, Ambrose found work as a watchman at the U.S. Mint, at \$1500 a year. Finding the work less than intellectually challenging, he began studying the works of famous authors, with the idea of training himself to be a serious writer. The Californians published two of his poems in 1867, and Bierce was on his way as a free-lance writer. The following year he was hired to write a regular column, "The Town Crier", in the News-Letter, a weekly. The work was made to order for Bierce. He was free to air his opinions, attack his detractors, sharpen his razor-like wit, and become known and feared by politicians and journalists as a force to be dealt with. He enjoyed nothing more than mercilessly impaling an enemy on the sharp point of his pen. About one journalist he wrote that he was "suffering from an unhealed wound. It is his mouth."² Journalists tried to outdo each other in outrageous lies and insults, and occasionally had to defend themselves against the objects of their invective. Bierce was once attacked by the husband of an actress he had reviewed unfavorably, calling her "a charming blackguard". After that unpleasant incident he always carried a Colt revolver with him, according to his friends.³ As a result of the notoriety (and increased readership, no doubt), he was promoted to the editorship of the News-Letter in 1868.

A year later Ambrose met a lively, accomplished, and well-bred girl from a comfortably established San Francisco family. Her father, Capt. H.H. Day (the "Grand Old Man", as Bierce called him), was a mining engineer whose work frequently kept him away from home for long periods of time. This left the task of bringing up Mary Ellen (Mollie) and her brother, James, to Mrs. Day, who had some very firm ideas on the matter. Mollie was trained in social skills -- she attended

the right balls, the acceptable social affairs and weddings, and, of course, played the piano. ("Piano, n. - A parlor utensil for subduing the impenitent visitor. It is operated by depressing the keys of the machine and the spirits of the audience.").⁴ Despite the disparity of their upbringings and the disappointment of Mrs. Day over Mollie's failure to make a suitable choice, they were married on Christmas Day, 1871. Capt. Day's wedding present to the attractive young couple was a wedding trip to England, and, after a brief stopover in Indiana to show off the new bride to his parents, the newlyweds were off to London.

Bierce's satirical style was an instant hit with the British and he found himself caught up in a round of all-night drinking parties, literary discussions and dinners. Mark Twain was on a lecture tour of England when Bierce met him at a dinner; Joaquin Miller--"that woolly wolf"--was entertaining British society with his version of the American Wild West. Mollie, meanwhile, stayed outside London in Bristol, living the life of a proper and pregnant Victorian wife. When their son Day was born in December 1892, Ambrose missed the great event, being elsewhere at the time.

The next summer mother-in-law Day arrived for a protracted (ten month) visit, and Ambrose began to get the feeling that he had taken on more than a wife and child. He managed to escape to Paris for a month, on an assignment for Figaro, but the following year a second son, Leigh, was born in June of 1874. By this time the Bierce household had moved from Bristol, to Bath, to Leamington; Ambrose had acquired a wife, two children, and a mother-in-law, as well as having five journals waiting for his articles. Mrs. Day finally left for California that summer, but it turned out to be only a temporary reprieve.

During the long voyage home, Mrs. Day must have reached certain conclusions. Her lovely daughter, bred for a comfortable life in San Francisco society, was

married to an irresponsible drunken journalist, who seemed bent on following the Bierce family tradition of siring thirteen children at scant two-year intervals. It was an appalling idea that would require some strong control on her part. When she arrived home, she invited Mollie and the children to visit her the following spring. The invitation was gladly accepted, and Mollie -- pregnant again -- left England with the boys. Bierce moved into a London apartment, only to discover in a letter from Mollie that he was to become a father for the third time. He returned to San Francisco in October of 1875 and went back to work at the Mint as an assayer, just in time for daughter Helen's birth in November.

Labor problems were developing in the city. The Workingman's party was formed to oppose Southern Pacific's use of cheap Chinese labor. To counteract this mostly Irish-Catholic pro-Labor group, Frank Pixley started up the Argonaut and hired Bierce as the literary editor on his newspaper. Probably at this time Bierce began to develop his reputation as a critic and authority, not just on poetry but on whatever topic was of current interest to the readers.

The Bierce family lived for a while on Harrison St. in San Francisco, then moved to Guerrero St., where the persistent Mrs. Day moved in with them again. Bierce took up a few hobbies -- bicycling, collecting Indian arrowheads and pine cones -- anything that gave him an excuse to be away from the house. Some of the staffers on the Argonaut believed that he was not married, and to a certain extent they were correct.

Four years passed and in 1879 Bierce had to break out of a situation that he felt had him trapped. He told Frank Pixley that he was leaving the Argonaut staff and going to South Dakota to prospect for gold. He left in the spring for Rockerville, and in a matter of months the gold-mining venture went broke

AMBROSE AND MOLLIE



BIERCE AT TIME OF HIS MARRIAGE



MARY ELLEN (MOLLIE) DAY BIERCE



HELEN BIERCE, THEIR DAUGHTER

and he had to return to San Francisco -- jobless. It was an episode in his life that he never spoke about. Swallowing his pride, he went back to the Argonaut and asked for his job back. Pixley in the meantime had discovered that the newspaper could get along without Bierce and refused to rehire him. This was a blow to his pride that he never got over, and he never missed an opportunity afterwards to skewer his former employer, "Mr. Pigsley of the Hogonaut".⁵ Years later, when Pixley died, Bierce wrote his epitaph: "Here lies Frank Pixley -- as usual", and commented that he was sorry to find out that Pixley had been cremated; it prevented him from spitting on his grave.

His character was emerging; he was proud, rebellious, over-sensitive, and appeared to lack any sympathy for other people. But he was also contradictory. He could show exceptional kindness under certain circumstances, although people seldom saw that side of Bierce because he kept it concealed under a hard shell of cynicism. He detested the hypocrisy of the so-called "Gilded Age", yet he had the typical Victorian male attitude toward women. He viewed them as objects for amusement, incapable of making any intellectual contributions to the world. In spite of his reputation as a worldly cynic, his understanding of women was about equal to that of an adolescent schoolboy. His ideal woman was chaste, beautiful and untouchable -- and completely unreal. Bierce had a difficult time all his life separating wish from reality, a strange quality in a cynic. He was the product of two warring societies: the strict, prudish, unforgiving society of Midwest Bible-belters, and the frivolous pleasure-seekers of Victorian times. Constantly seeking his place in the world, he finally chose to withdraw from it since it would not accept him on his own terms. He preferred to be first in a small group than second in a larger one.

A brilliant journalist, Bierce recognized the ephemeral nature of his work.

He would have preferred to be a poet, and he was a good one -- but not a great one. Reason enough to give it up. He scoffed at novels; perhaps he was unable to develop and sustain his characters for the time required to make them human and believable. Therefore he never wrote a novel. But in one genre he was the undisputed master: the shocking, macabre short story, where horror and humor mingled. The reader can search and search for a personal glimpse of Bierce in his tales and not find it. He is the unaffected observer, watching the struggles of his characters to extricate themselves from the nightmarish situations into which he has placed them, finding amusement where others would feel pity. Bierce was at his best when he wrote about the Civil War; its profound impression on him gave the stories a shock and immediacy like that of viewing a heinous crime from the window of a speeding train.

Unfortunately for Mollie and the children, while Bierce's character was taking shape, they were being pushed more and more toward the fringes of his life. They moved again, this time to the Ft. Mason area, farther out of the mainstream of the city; then the family moved to Oakland. Albert Bierce had followed his brother to California after the war, and had been living quite contentedly in Oakland for a number of years. Day, Leigh and Helen enjoyed visiting him because they could play with their cousin Carleton, but this happy family situation was not to last long because Ambrose felt that Mollie's mother and brother James were again interfering too much in his life. Using his asthma as a reason for leaving the San Francisco wind and fog, he moved to Auburn, to live alone at the Putnam House.

Albert had a vacation cabin near St. Helena where Ambrose had spent some pleasant times, and possibly at his suggestion the rootless family moved to Napa County. Mollie and the children had a house in the town of St. Helena; Ambrose

chose to live seven miles away on Howell Mountain at a small resort ("the last resort", as he put it) called Angwin's. The people of St. Helena who came to know Mollie described her as "tall and handsome", "stunning" and "a sociable person", who enjoyed the small town activities.⁶ They seldom saw her husband, who visited the family only occasionally on weekends. His daughter Helen recalled some happy memories of going on bicycling trips with her father to collect arrowheads. She also recalled that "he wrote all night and slept half the next day; he brooded by himself most of the time, sitting motionless and wordless by the library fire...."⁷

Mollie did her best to establish a stable home for the children and her sometimes-husband. She planted rosebushes in the front yard and tried to smooth over her husband's satirical remarks about the town. He once referred to the local church as "St. Iniquity". One anecdote in Carey McWilliams' biography of Bierce showed what Mollie was up against. The local minister dropped by for a Sunday afternoon visit when Ambrose was there on one of his rare visits. As they sat in the parlor talking, Leigh burst breathless into the room. "Daddy, Daddy -- Day just said 'Damn God'". There was a moment of pained silence, then Bierce remarked quietly, "Go and tell Day that I have repeatedly told him not to say 'Damn God' when he means 'God Damn'." ⁸

Bierce appeared to enjoy his children --when he was with them. Day was very much like his father -- strong-willed, impetuous, a chip on his shoulder-- while Leigh was calmer and less aggressive. Helen seemed to have a special understanding of her father, and in 1933 she wrote an article for the American Mercury titled "Ambrose Bierce at Home". Undoubtedly a short article.

When William Randolph Hearst took over his father's newspaper, the Examiner, in 1887, Bierce's luck took an upward turn. Although he seldom agreed with Hearst,

he accepted the offer of a steady job from him, and steady it was, for the next twenty years. Hearst guaranteed Bierce absolute freedom to say anything he wanted in his column "Prattle". But the relationship was anything but smooth. Bierce resigned again and again and Hearst always persuaded him to come back. They needed each other. Bierce needed the paycheck and the fame his column brought him; Hearst needed his fiery columnist to attract readers to his newspaper.

With the steady job and the degree of freedom that it offered, some stability appeared possible in the Bierce household at last. But it was not to be. Ambrose had a serious argument with Day, now sixteen, who wanted to quit school and become a journalist. Day flung out of the house in a rage and ran away to Red Bluff, a hundred miles from St. Helena, where he got a job on the newspaper. Then, as Helen relates it, the final break came between Mollie and Ambrose during the winter of 1888-9. During one of his infrequent visits home, he discovered a letter written to Mollie by an admirer, a "Danish gentleman." "There was a big scene", Helen wrote, "... and after that, he packed his bags and left, never to return. Mother was broken-hearted. She did not see the other man again, and she swore to me that it had not been a real romance, but Father would not listen -- it was enough that she had permitted some love-letters to be written to her." This may have been the escape hatch Bierce subconsciously had been seeking; or it could have been one more indication of his inability to cope with life as it was, rather than how he wanted it to be.

Ambrose and Mollie saw each other one more time after this -- at Day's funeral July 30, 1889. Day had fallen in love with a sixteen-year-old girl, his landlady's daughter, and when she eloped with his friend he killed her husband and wounded her. Realizing what he had done, he put the pistol to his own head. Bierce was completely shattered. He was only forty-seven, but he wrote to a friend that

he had "gone quite gray". Frank Pixley couldn't resist the temptation to twist the knife in his enemy's wound and wrote a mean-spirited editorial about the murder-suicide.

For a month "Prattle" didn't appear in the Examiner, then it resumed. Bierce spent his time between San Francisco and Oakland, visiting Albert. In 1890 he met Gertrude Atherton, an attractive young novelist, who came to visit him at Sunol. It was an unpleasant afternoon for both of them, Bierce calling her "a detestable vixen" when she refused to let him kiss her as she was about to leave on the train. Perhaps he had chosen the wrong setting -- next to a "malodorous pigpen" -- for the brief romance. Nevertheless they continued to correspond. "I do not like you when we are face to face," she wrote him.⁹ Gertrude also wrote a column for the Examiner, which lasted only a few months. It was called "Woman in Her Variety" -- just the sort of thing that would irritate Bierce. She valued his critical opinion of the novel she was writing; she suggested the title "Shapes of Clay" for his collection of poetry, but gradually they drifted away from their correspondence with each other. For years Atherton carefully preserved his letters to her in a trunk, but it was destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906.¹⁰

As Bierce's fame grew, young writers began to come to him for help with their work. In 1893 George Sterling, a young man recently arrived from Sag Harbor, N.Y., met him while camping at Lake Temescal. Sterling, an aspiring poet, was working as a secretary for his wealthy uncle in Oakland and became Bierce's favorite and most faithful disciple. Another poet, Edwin Markham, was also a pupil, although later his "Man with the Hoe" was to meet with the master's disapproval because he thought it too socialistic and pro-Union.

During this period, a strange young fellow, Adolphe Danziger, arrived from Germany and looked up Bierce. He had a varied background -- dentist, rabbi, lawyer,

and translator of a story by German writer Richard Voss. He wanted Bierce to edit the story for him so they could have it published as "The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter." Bierce agreed, but when the the story appeared it was credited to "Ambrose Bierce and Adolphe Danziger", probably because the publisher felt that Bierce's name was better known and would sell more copies. This led to strained relations between editor and translator (who thought his name should have top-billing), but not strained enough to keep Danziger from persuading Bierce to set up a rather shaky publishing business with him. Danziger became so irritating that Bierce finally went after him with a cane "and laid it about his partner's ears",¹¹ a story stoutly denied by Danziger in his error-filled Portrait of Bierce.¹² He did admit, however, to a small dispute they had at Angwin's: " I thought Bierce unjustified in calling me unreliable, and only fit for an insane asylum, simply because I had lost his eyeglasses on the road while bringing them back from the optician."¹³

Danziger (who later changed his name to "de Castro", after securing a consulate in Madrid) might best be described as a social-climbing dandy. In one photograph he appears in a fur coat, silk top hat, spats, and carrying a Malacca cane. He was eager to advance himself in San Francisco society, and managed to meet wealthy and socially prominent people through Bierce. He once told Bierce that he wanted to attend one of Gertrude Atherton's "interesting Sunday morning breakfasts", but Bierce warned him to stay away. He went anyway, and described Mrs. Atherton's gown as a "long, lacey, diaphonous affair" and noted that "she held a cigarette between between her smiling lips..."¹⁴

Occasionally Danziger brought ether to Bierce when he was at Angwin's, to treat his asthma attacks.¹⁵ He was also available for dental work, which took no small amount of courage on his part, with such an irritable patient. Evidently



ADOLPHE DANZIGER -- 1908

To G. A. Danziger, my friend
and collaborator in letters,
Ambrose Bierce,
St. Helena, Calif.,
Oct. 2, 1892.

A NOTE FROM BIERCE

Danziger could, on occasion, be entertaining, because several times he described Bierce as "bursting out in one of those staccato laughs which resembled nothing so much as that of a hungry coyote howling for a meal."¹⁶ And another time, "he laughed the throaty laugh I know so well, that had in it the yawn of the tiger."¹⁷ On the other hand, pompous Walter Neale, another biographer, claimed that in all the years he knew Bierce, he never heard him laugh out loud.¹⁸ Bierce finally escaped his persistent friend by having the people at the Examiner tell Danziger that "Ambrose Bierce had gone East to stay", a half-truth that was shortly to turn into reality.

Meanwhile there were more important matters to attend to. Another collection of Bierce's short stories (Can Such Things Be?) appeared in 1893, adding to his reputation as the major author of diabolical tales. He continued to be pursued by young would-be writers who sought his help and criticism, and who worked, unsuccessfully, at copying his precise mordant style.

Hearst was starting to target Southern Pacific's "Big Four": Mark Hopkins, Charlie Crocker, Leland Stanford (Bierce liked to refer to him as "Stealand Landford", or, "£eland \$tanford"), and Collis Huntington. Having borrowed \$75 million from the U.S. Government for the construction of their railroad, these gentlemen now proposed that the repayment of this debt be extended over the next fifty years at 1% interest. In other words, they were trying to get out of repaying the debt. By the time this matter reached Congress, Hearst and the Examiner were in hot pursuit. Collis Huntington, "...a hard but cheery old man with no more soul than a shark",¹⁹ was the lone remaining member of the Big Four, so the full force of their wrath fell upon him.

While this situation was developing, Bierce was casting about for something to occupy his time. Packing up "Pin the Reptile", his pet snake, in his bicycle

bag, he pedaled down to San Jose to see if the warmer climate might benefit his asthma. Just before reaching San Jose "Pin" managed to escape from the bag and wriggle off into the weeds, leaving Bierce with "nothing to lavish my affection on." In a letter written from San Jose and dated October 17, 1894, he wrote: "If I continue well I shall remain here or hereabout; if not I don't know where I shall go. Probably into the Santa Cruz Mountains or to Gilroy."²⁰ Again, on November 20, 1894, he wrote from San Jose that he was sending a Wells Fargo money order "for all the money I can presently afford" to help in a fund-raiser for his friend Ina Coolbrith. He also sent a monthly check to Mollie, who had moved to Los Angeles with her mother. Leigh joined his mother in Southern California and took a job on the Los Angeles Record; Helen was also with her mother and grandmother.

But he was lonely in San Jose. He wrote to Blanche Partington: "I speak to nobody but my chambermaid and the waiter at my restaurant."²¹ His presence in the area did not go unnoticed, however. When he moved into the El Monte Hotel in Los Gatos the local newspaper noted that "Ambrose Bierce of the San Francisco Examiner and author of "Prattle," was a visitor in Los Gatos for several weeks in the spring of 1895."²² He discovered that his old friend Danziger had "been instated as pastor of a congregation in San Jose ... before many moons the congregation will be in search of the sacred vessels of the altar, known to have been there when Danziger came."²³

During this short hiatus from the usual pressures in his life, he made the acquaintance of a delightful young couple, Frank and Una Hume, who lived on their large fruit ranch between Los Gatos and Saratoga. They were building an impressive home, "Dotswood", which became a magnet for distinguished people from all around the Bay Area, who dropped in to attend Una's "salons". They gathered in the large living room, the light from the stained glass windows streaming over them while

they engaged in conversation and cocktails. Other guests found their way outside to the spring-fed swimming pool where they spent leisurely summer afternoons. Bierce found himself the center of attention and admiration at Glen Una ranch. He was well-known for his wickedly amusing "Prattle" in the Examiner, as well as for the recently published volume of short stories. His distinguished appearance, thick blond hair and bushy eyebrows, the moustache with rakishly upturned ends, and, above all, his piercing blue eyes made him irresistibly attractive to the ladies. In addition, he treated them with an old-world romanticism that was frequently mistaken for a more serious passion by the less sophisticated. It was a game that he played successfully, for the most part, except in the case of the perceptive Gertrude Atherton. He stopped in at Glen Una frequently to hold court and pontificate on an endless variety of subjects, from literary to political. Glen Una was, in his own word, "paradise."

One day, while opening his mail at the El Monte and sorting through the letters from disciples and numerous female admirers, he came across a letter from twenty-two-year-old Lily Walsh. She had enclosed a poem and asked Ambrose to evaluate it. The poem, "Lines Suggested by a Visit to the Institute for Deaf, Dumb, and Blind--at Berkeley", interested him and a correspondence grew up between them. He began to tutor his new protégé in the art of poetry, and asked for some details of her life that might help him to better understand her work. Lily had been born in London and lost her hearing when she was five, after a bout with scarlet fever. "Neglect soon rendered me totally deaf But I never lost the power of speech," she wrote.²⁴ She was sent to several schools for the "deaf and dumb" in England to learn a trade. For a while she lived with an aunt, then moved to New York to stay with her sister. She eventually moved West to live with an aunt and uncle in San Francisco, where she worked as a maid for her aunt. Lily was intelligent and eager

to educate herself, and the Berkeley Institute was her goal, as soon as she could afford the tuition.

Her story touched Bierce and he arranged for Lily to attend the Institute, which was not far from Oakland, where her brother lived. Her health was precarious all her life, however, and not long after enrolling at the Berkeley school Lily died of a heart attack. She had asked to be buried in Los Gatos so her friend and benefactor, Ambrose, could visit her grave, but unfortunately, this was not to be. Bierce was at St. Helena when he received word of Lily's death, and was unable to travel. He was recovering from severe bruises and a broken rib -- the result of a bicycling accident. Before he was able to return, Lily's relatives had buried her at Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland. Ambrose kept Lily's notebooks and letters, along with a photograph of her, taken when she was a schoolgirl in England. Years later, in 1911, he wrote Lora, his nephew Carleton's wife, "...will you go out to Mountain View Cemetery with your camera and take a picture of the grave of Elizabeth (Lily) Walsh, the little deaf mute girl I told you of? ...It is in the Catholic part of the cemetery -- St. Mary's."²⁵ He grieved for her as if she had been his own daughter.

Two months later, in January 1896, he received a telegram from Hearst asking him to go to Washington, D.C., to report on the growing Southern Pacific loan scandal. He contacted Leigh in Los Angeles, who immediately quit his newspaper job and joined his father for the trip back East. Bierce had been waiting for years to go after Collis Huntington, "this inflated old pigskin...his pockets loaded with dishonest gold which he knows neither how to enjoy nor to whom to bequeath....The swine of the Century."²⁶ He went after Huntington with the zeal of a religious fanatic and when the battle ended, Southern Pacific had lost. They agreed to pay off the debt in a series of twenty notes, due every six months. After the strain

of constant warfare for six months, Bierce left Washington in failing health, to spend a month recuperating in New Jersey. "The Prattler", as he was now nationally known, resumed his column in July, as if nothing had happened. But after a few months in New York the old restless feeling came back and in December he took the train back to California, stopping briefly to see his daughter Helen, but not his wife Mollies. Leigh stayed behind, his father having helped him find a job on Hearst's New York Journal.

Once again in the comfort of the El Monte at Los Gatos, Bierce tried to pick up the threads of his life from the previous year. In town he enjoyed visiting at John Miles' home, especially when Kitty, his attractive young daughter, was around. Miles was a capitalist and developer from Maine ; he was a general all-around good fellow and drinking companion, and spoken of in the local newspaper in complimentary terms for his performances as a church soloist. When Miles wasn't available, Bierce strolled out to Glen Una, and found that Una's circle of dilettantes had become larger -- and younger.

Casting about for a more permanent residence, partly to escape the numerous visitors and the curse of the telephone at El Monte ("Telephone, n....An invention of the devil which abrogates some of the advantages of making a disagreeable person keep his distance." --Devil's Dictionary), Bierce overheard hotel guests talking about Wright's Station in the Santa Cruz Mountains, only a few miles from Los Gatos by train. Wright's had hotels and resorts nearby, a marvelous picnic grounds called Sunset Park, lit by Japanese lanterns at night, and, best of all, private cabins could be rented by those desiring peace and quiet. It seemed to be everything he wanted-- privacy and distance from the clamoring women who took up his time. "Women", he remarked, "are of three sexes --the fair sex, the bare sex, and the blare sex", the latter being mostly found in Sacramento. He had announced,

SOME TEMPORARY "HOMES"

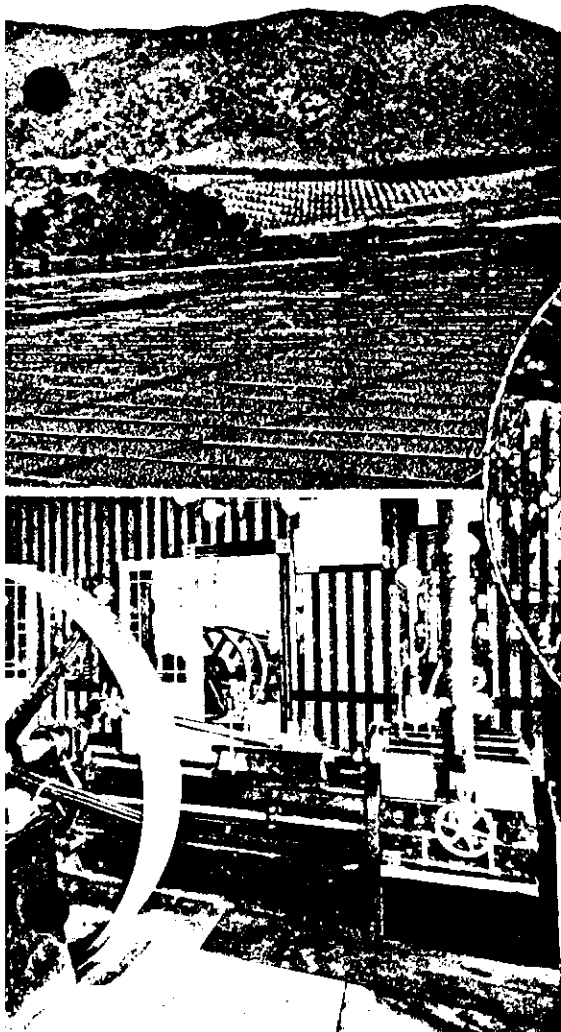


EL MONTE HOTEL



JEFFREYS HOTEL AT WRIGHTS STATION

UNA HUME'S RANCH



A Glimpse of Fruit Drying Trays.
In the Engine Room.



THE GREAT GLEN UNA PRUNE ORCHARD.

Rustic Seats in a Live Oak.



A View of a Portion of the Prune Orchard.

a number of times, that he intended to retire from writing; he was fifty-five and wanted a rest from the hectic world of journalism and some time to commune with Nature . He could become another Socrates, gathering his worshipful students at his feet while they learned from the Master, all the time surrounded by warbling birds and towering redwoods.

By October he was stepping off the train at Wright's Station, surveying his new kingdom with pleasure. He found a nice little hotel, the "Jeffreys", that had private cabins for rent. The "Bohemia", just down the road, was better-known and patronized, but he was more concerned about peace and privacy. He moved in, picking up a frog for a companion and paperweight (when it was sleeping in a jar on his writing desk). But, for good or bad, the Bierce luck held. Rounding a corner outside the hotel one day, he literally ran into another pretty young thing, Leila Cotton, daughter of the family who owned the "Bohemia". It wasn't long before he was taking his meals down at their hotel, and being treated like a member of the family.

Then he discovered Josephine McCrackin. Josephine lived at Rancho Paraiso, above the Jeffreys at the top of Loma Prieta Avenue. Her husband Jackson, now a farmer, had been Speaker of the Territorial Legislature in Arizona. Mrs. McCrackin was four years older than Ambrose, the first person of his generation, aside from his brother Albert, to become a firm and understanding friend. They began to discover that they had more in common than their ages. Josephine had grown up in St. Louis, Missouri, and had her own memories of the Civil War. Her brother had been a riverboat pilot, and one of his jobs was to bring the wounded soldiers up the Tennessee River after the battle of Shiloh. Josephine was aboard the river steamer with him. In a letter she wrote years later to Bierce, she described the scene: "It was a long procession of litters and stretchers moving from the steamer

to the levee at St. Louis to the hastily erected hospital farther uptown. Most of the wounded soldiers had their faces covered; but wherever a hand was seen, the skin on it was shriveled and wrinkled, from the rain that had fallen on these poor fellows for so long."²⁷ The memory sounded like something out of "Tales of Soldiers and Civilians". Both she and Bierce understood the personal horrors of the Civil War, stripped of the flags, the stirring music and the drum rolls.

When the solitude and quiet of the cabin began to weigh on him, Bierce would announce, "I'm going up to Jo's", and head up the road, knowing he would find a sympathetic ear and intelligent conversation. Jo McCrackin had been a writer for the Overland Monthly ("the Warmed Overland" Bierce called it), as had Bierce; she later worked for the Santa Cruz Sentinal, so they had mutual experiences in journalism to share. She was a good counter-balance to his cynicism and pessimism. He was comfortable around her, letting down his guard and speaking about experiences he couldn't share with the younger people he knew. They were sympathetic to him (although he rejected any attempt they might make to pity him); but through no fault of theirs, they lacked the necessary perspective that came only with age.

An artists' colony was developing at Carmel, and occasionally some of the writers found their way up to "Bohemia", among them Jack London, Herman Scheffauer, and the ever-faithful George Sterling, who, with the notable exception of London, began to form the nucleus of a new group of disciples. Bierce went to Carmel a few times, but found it too "Socialistic" for his taste. The new generation of writers seemed to be a different breed. Sterling stayed with the classical, fanciful style of poetry so dear to his master's heart; but when Edwin Markham read his "Man with the Hoe" to the group, Bierce was not pleased. It was too

pro-Labor and dealt with a less than uplifting subject, he said. Markham had to wait until an Examiner editor read the poem and published it in the paper. Bierce was furious. He had "discovered" Markham, and felt that he should have been given some recognition.

Without doubt, Bierce's success as a tutor was with George Sterling, and this was because Sterling constantly sought his advice about subject matter and style, and was so dependent on Bierce's opinion that he could hardly make an independent move. Bierce was in a position to get his protégé's work before the public by publishing his poems in "Prattle", and declaring that Sterling was the greatest poet on this side of the Atlantic. Sterling was described by his friends as "gay and witty, though he could be morose when drinking too heavily". The great San Francisco photographer, Arnold Genthe, who was at Carmel experimenting with color photography, did a portrait of Sterling, showing him in profile. Some thought the portrait reminded them of Dante, but another acquaintance remarked that his face was "like a Grecian coin that had been run over by a Roman chariot." ²⁸ He and Bierce maintained a lengthy correspondence over the years, but it was mostly concerned with the techniques of poetry. Bierce revealed very little about himself that was personal.

Another "disciple" who joined the group was seventeen-year-old Herman Scheffauer, who was studying architecture, but harboring the desire to become a poet. Bierce was less successful in molding "Scheff" in his image, because the young man had an incurable streak of independence and was caught up in the bohemian life at Carmel.

Not all the time at Wright's was spent in study and literary discussions, by any means. Dr. Hugh Doyle, an Englishman living in Santa Cruz, became a good friend and drinking companion. It was a simple matter for Ambrose to take the train at

DISCIPLES AND FRIENDS



JOSEPHINE CLIFFORD MC CRACKIN



GEORGE STERLING



HERMAN SCHEFFAUER, KITTY MILES, BIERCE



LILY WALSH

Wright's and travel through the mountains to visit Doyle, who was unsuccessfully attempting to write poetry in the style of Rudyard Kipling. When one of Bierce's pupils bought a newspaper, The Penny Press, and tried out the satirical style that had made his mentor so popular, Doyle began contributing to it. The good citizens of Santa Cruz were so outraged by the insults and slander in the upstart newspaper that it had to be sold in a short time. Dr. Doyle felt that he had barely escaped being tarred and feathered, and turned to an Oriental setting for his next publication.

Kitty Miles came up on the train from Los Gatos for visits, and Ambrose and Scheff returned the compliment by calling on her at home and catching up on what was going on in and around the town. Leila Cotton and another pupil, Eva Crawford, went on long walks in the redwoods with Bierce, carrying with them a basket of food, bottles of white wine and brandy, books, and a blanket to spread over the redwood needles.

The summer of '99 was indeed one long holiday for Bierce, filled, as it was, with friends, stimulating conversations, good food and drink, and time for some well-earned relaxation. He was at the peak of his fame; never again would he have such a group of devoted followers; never again would his name be so well known. He was recognized as a literary critic, a journalist, conqueror of the hated Southern Pacific "railroques", and internationally known satirist. But the winds blowing off the Pacific were bringing a sea-change -- the winter of discontent was coming.

In February 1897 Frank Hume, Una's husband, had died suddenly of meningitis at Glen Una. He was only twenty-five, and left a two-year-old child and a very attractive widow. As soon as decently possible, Una resumed her popular salons. Over the course of time -- a rather short time -- she met Dr. Russell Cool, a San Francisco dentist, and they were married on Christman Eve, 1898, in Berkeley. Bierce

continued to visit Glen Una, but snakes had entered his Garden of Eden; the atmosphere had subtly changed. He felt that he was no longer the star attraction, and was gradually being replaced by a younger, more currently popular group. He quarreled with Una, declared that "Dotswood" was good only in the "closed season for snakes", and walked out of her life. The Miles family had gone back to Maine on an extended visit and were unsure that they would return to Los Gatos. Sterling and Scheffauer had fallen under the influence of Jack London's socialistic preachings. Even Wright's was being overrun by summer tourists and organizational outings at Sunset Park.

It seemed that the whole country was undergoing a change, and certainly not one for the better, in Bierce's opinion. When the battleship Maine exploded in Havana harbor under somewhat suspicious circumstances, the Hearst newspapers whipped up a national furor that led to the Spanish-American War. Bierce was disgusted. He saw the war as a thinly veiled excuse for the United States to exercise the Monroe Doctrine by annexing Hawaii and the Philippines. But he was enough of a realist to comment that if the country became engaged in a war, it would be necessary to have intelligent commanders, good strategy, and full public support. He was still a good student of military matters.

The summer was ending, and so was one of the happiest periods in Bierce's life. He had been two years in the Santa Cruz Mountains, hiking the forest trails, watching the wildlife at close range, reading, talking with friends; but now there was an ominous pause, as if the mountains were waiting for some catastrophe. It came in October of 1899, on a warm dry fall day, when the forest fire began. The flames ate their way along the ridge near Loma Prieta, steadily devouring everything in the way. The McCrackins' Monte Paraiso lay directly in the path of the fire, and every building was completely destroyed. Jo and her husband escaped,

but when they returned there was nothing left but the ruins of their home and the fire-blackened stumps of the great redwoods. Bierce put his cape around Jo's shoulders as he and Scheff stood in stunned silence with their friend.

In November Bierce wrote to a friend in Houston: "In a few weeks I expect to go to Washington, D.C., where I shall probably remain. It is simply a change of duties, excepting that I shall probably do more work for the Journal and less for the Examiner."²⁹ A reasonable explanation, at least on the surface, but to anyone who had followed the pattern of his life it was another escape, another attempt to find the elusive freedom that he craved.

By mid-December he was at the railroad station, ready to begin his journey back East, to New York. In his Devil's Dictionary, finally published six years later, he wrote: "Railroad, n. ...The chief of many mechanical devices enabling us to get away from where we are to where we are no better off."³⁰ He left Wright's Station with no illusions. The century he had known was ending; the changes taking place were strange and unsettling. He was returning to a time and place that had never given him much pleasure, but maybe this time it would be different. If not, he could always move on; he was getting too old to start over.

He arrived in New York with the new year, January 1, 1900, too ill to travel on to Washington. He spent some time with Leigh, then moved on to Washington, where he found work as a political reporter, and began writing a new column, "The Passing Show". This time he seemed content to watch it pass.

For the next few years Bierce tried to recapture the past and re-live the memories of times when he had felt alive and excited about life. He revisited the Civil War battlefields and retraced, on foot, the route of the "Bloody 9th". He went to New Orleans, then took a ship to see how the work on the Panama Canal was progressing. He continued around the Horn of South America and up the coast

to San Francisco. In June of 1912 he made a final trip to California and visited the unmarked graves of his family in St. Helena. He also broke off all remaining friendships, even with his brother Albert ; he never returned to Wright's Station.

Only Jo McCrackin was spared. Although he hadn't corresponded with her for thirteen years, he wrote to her from Washington: "Jan. 13, 1913 I thank you for your friendship -- and much besides. This is to say good-bye ...but some time, somewhere, I hope to hear from you again. ...I shall go into Mexico with a pretty definite purpose. ...You must try to forgive my obstinacy in not 'perishing' where I am. I want to be where something worthwhile is going on. [A revolution was in progress at that time in Mexico.] I am pretty fond of you, I guess. May you live as long as you want to, and then pass smilingly into the darkness, the good, good darkness. Devotedly your friend, Ambrose Bierce."³¹

Ambrose Bierce was last heard from December 26, 1913, at Chihuahua, Mexico, on his way to the fighting at Ojinaga.

THE MANY FACES OF BIERCE



THE COLUMNIST



CRITIC AND MENTOR



DREAMER



CYNIC

FOOTNOTES

1. Paul Fatout, The Devil's Lexicographer, p. 45.
2. Richard Dillon, Humbugs and Heroes, p.53.
3. Fatout, op. cit. , 128.
4. Ambrose Bierce, Collected Writings, "The Devil's Dictionary", p. 325.
5. Fatout, op. cit. , p. 137.
6. Ibid., p. 151.
7. Ibid. , p. 455. From "Ambrose Bierce at Home", American Mercury, Vol. XXX, No. 120 (Dec. 1933).
8. Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce, A Biography, p. 173.
9. Emily Wortis Leider, California's Daughter, pp. 116-124.
10. Ibid., p. 359.
11. Fatout, op. cit., p. 201.
12. Adolphe de Castro, Portrait of Bierce, p. 267.
13. Ibid., p. 91.
14. Ibid., p.161.
15. Ibid., p. 168.
16. Ibid., p.206.
17. Ibid., p. 215.
18. Walter Neale, Life of Ambrose Bierce, p. 209.
19. Fatout, op. cit., p. 219.
20. Ambrose Bierce, Letters, Ed. Pope, p. 36.
21. Ibid., p. 39.

22. Los Gatos Times, Aug. 23, 1940. "Trail Days" edit.
23. Fatout, op. cit., p. 205.
24. Annagret Ogden, "Dear Ambrose", The Californians, Vol.5, No.6 (Nov/Dec., 1987), 10.
25. Bierce, Letters, op. cit., p. 168.
26. Fatout, op. cit., p.218.
27. McWilliams, op. cit., p.43.
28. Franklin Walker, The Seacoast of Bohemia, p. 20.
29. Fatout, op. cit., p. 236.
30. Bierce, Collected Works, op. cit., p.338.
31. Bierce, Letters , op. cit. , p.196.

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