

BITTER BIERCE
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Seventh Draft

BITTER BIERCE: OR THE FRICTION WE CALL GRIEF

Setting: A large open room, things arranged as for a public lecture.

We see AMBROSE BIERCE-- a tall, elegant and very capable-looking man-- alone, standing behind a wooden table; there is something a little apparitional about his good looks (And why does not the apparition of a suit of clothes sometimes walk abroad without a ghost in it?); on the table is a cabbage-- an elegant, very capable-looking and quite green-
- cabbage:

Reality, noun.

The dream of a mad philosopher.

That which remains in the cupel if one should
assay a phantom. The nucleus of a vacuum.

Realism, noun.

The art of depicting nature as it is seen by
toads.

—

Disobedience, noun.

The silver lining in the cloud of servitude.

Zigzag, verb transitive.

To move forward uncertainly, from side to
side, as one carrying the white man's burden.

—

My country 'tis of thee,

sweet land of felony,

of thee I sing;

Land where my fathers fried

young witches and applied

Whips to the Quaker's hide,

and made him spring.

They call me "Bitter Bierce".

"A purveyor of morbidities."

"Sado-masochistic," says the good doctor Isaac
Goldberg.

"Bierce is as interesting as a kangaroo," in the
opinion of J. S. Cowley-Brown, whoever he
was.

My great, great, great great grandfather,
Austin Bears, sailed on the good ship

"Confidence" in 1638 from Southhampton and landed at Barnstable on Cape Cod. There are still Bearses on Cape Cod no doubt, stirring up trouble.

Troubling the pious with rational language.

Language, noun.

The music with which we charm the serpents guarding another's treasure.

Rational, adjective.

Devoid of all delusions save those of observation, experience and reflection.

Piety, noun.

Reverence for the supreme being, based on his supposed resemblance to man.

—

From a flyleaf of the family bible printed in 1699: Marquis, Said Louis XIV to Marquis de Bearse, You make puns on all subjects. Make one on me. Sire, replied the courteous Marquis, you are no subject.

—

My uncle, General Lucius Verus Bierce organized "The Grand Eagles", a secret society of some 300 crested idiots to invade Canada and free her from the despotism of Sir John Coburn. The British struck first and virtually annihilated the force. Uncle retreated to Swan Lake to reorganize. He told the remnant, Canadian liberty depends on you.

On returning to Ohio Uncle Lucius Verus was called before the United States Court at Columbus to answer for his violation of the Neutrality Law of 1818.

Meanwhile, my own family migrated to Horse

Cave, Ohio, where I was born on the 24th of June, 1842. When I was still quite young we moved to Indiana, an even more drab and featureless place. Flat and Dull and, in the summers, unbearably warm.

My father, Marcus Aurelius Bierce was of altogether a more somber (not to mention mediocre) disposition. And both my parents were afflicted by the madness of religion; Religion, that daughter of Hope and Fear, who is in the habit of explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable.

My siblings' names all begin with a capital A: Abigail Bell, Amelia Josephine, Ann Maria, Addison Byron, Aurelius, Almeda Sophia, Albert Sherwood, Augustus, and yours truly, Ambrose Gwinnett.

A dream.

I am travelling in darkness through a fire-swept region. Pools of water glimmer in shallow depressions, as if the fire had been followed by rain. A crimson light burns in the West. Which reminds me in later years of a painting by Dore. Battlements loom up before me. Wandering around in the monstrous building I come into a large room full of the same gleaming phantasmagorical light. Upon a bed a figure lies-- the features are my own.

—

Early one morning in 1872 I murdered my father-- an act which made a deep impression on me at the time. This was before my marriage when I was living with my parents in Wisconsin. My father and I were in the library of our home, dividing the proceeds of a burglary which we had committed that night. These consisted of household goods mostly, and the task of equitable division was difficult.

We got on very well with the napkins, towels and such things, and the silverware was parted pretty nearly equally, but you can see for yourself that when you try to divide a single music-box by two without a remainder you will have trouble. It was that music-box which brought disaster and disgrace upon our family. If we had left it my poor father might now be alive.

It was the most exquisite and beautiful piece of workmanship-- inlaid with costly woods and carven very curiously. It would not only play a great variety of tunes, but would whistle like a quail, bark like a dog, crow every morning at daylight whether it was wound up or not, and break the ten commandments. It was this last mentioned accomplishment that won my father's heart and caused him to commit the only dishonorable act of his life.

Though possibly he would have committed more if he had been spared. He tried to conceal that music-box from me, and declared upon his honor that he had not taken it, though I knew very well that, so far as he was concerned, the burglary had been undertaken chiefly for the purpose of obtaining it.

My father had the music-box hidden under his cloak; we had worn cloaks by way of disguise. He had solemnly assured me but I knew that he had....

A small axe, which we had used to break into the unlucky house, lay between us on the table; I picked it up. The old man seeing that further concealment was useless took the box from under his cloak and set it on the table. Cut it in two if you prefer that, he said; I tried to save it from destruction.

He was a passionate lover of music and could

himself play the concertina with expression and feeling.

I said: I do not question the purity of your motive: it would be presumptuous in me to sit in judgement on my father. But business is business, and with this axe I am going to effect a dissolution of our partnership unless you will consent in all future burglaries to wear a bell-punch.

No, he said, after some reflection, no, I could not do that; people would say that you distrusted me.

I could not help admiring his spirit and sensitiveness; for a moment I was proud of him and disposed to overlook his fault, but a glance at the richly jeweled music-box decided me; and as I said, I removed the old man from this vale of tears.

That afternoon I went to the chief of police, told him what I had done and asked his advice. It would be very painful to me if the facts became publicly known. My conduct would be generally condemned; the newspapers would bring it up against me if ever I should run for office. The chief saw the force of these considerations; he himself was an assassin of wide experience.

—

He holds up the cabbage.

Cabbage, noun.
A familiar kitchen vegetable about as large and wise as a human head.

Saint, noun.
A dead sinner revised and edited.

My early schooling was very rudimentary. My uncle Lucius Verus, however, arranged for my attendance at the Kentucky Military Institute. In addition to the principles of the military, I studied draftsmanship and map-making-- those who have had occasion to examine them have been invariably amazed by the high quality of the maps and other cartoons that I prepared during the Civil War. But I was only there for a year. The place burned down, and soon after came the war.

I returned home and enlisted on April 19th 1861 and was assigned to the 9th Indiana Infantry. This was four days after President Lincoln announced the enforcement of the laws of Union, and requested a volunteer force of 75,000 for that purpose.

The 9th Indiana was sent to Virginia, to the Cheat River Valley. That region has ever since been (for me) a kind of dreamland, for the first engagements of the war were sham battles, opera bouffe affairs. Many of us Indiana and Ohio boys had never seen a mountain before, and here were we, perched on the crest of the Alleghanies, watching the faint graying of the blue above the main range-- smoke of the enemy camp.

With what pure delight we inhaled its fragrances of spruce and pine! How we stared with something like awe at its clumps of laurel, whose foliage had been accounted excellent for the heads of illustrious Romans. We carved its roots into finger rings and pipes. We gathered spruce-gum and sent it to our sweethearts in letters. Then there is the matter of what I saw, only a few months later, at Shiloh.

The 9th Indiana had been held in reserve, and so we were absent when Johnston's

Confederates surprised Grant's army very early Sunday morning April 9th, 1862 and drove them back to the banks of the Tennessee. But within minutes of the alarm we were running, along with the rest of General Buell's army, the whole eight miles to Pittsburgh Landing.

We passed the last vestiges of forest and came to the place where the battle had raged. Pools of water filled the depressions of earth, discs of rain-water tinged with blood. The force of the fighting was shown by the leafless trees, the blackened stumps. Knapsacks were strewn about and the debris of battle littered the field. Bodies of dead horses were pitched against trees and cannon caissons; ammunition wagons were capsized; broken timbers dotted the ground as though thrown about by the wind of a hurricane.

There were men enough, all dead apparently; except one who lay near where I halted my platoon-- a Federal sergeant, variously hurt, who had been a fine giant in his time. He lay face upward, taking in his breath in convulsive, rattling snorts, and blowing it out in sputters of froth which crawled creamily down his cheek. A bullet had clipped a groove in his skull, above the temple; from this the brain protruded in bosses, dropping off in flakes and strings.

Later, I obtained leave to visit a ravine where a company of Illinois men had been surrounded and, refusing to surrender, had been shot to the man. The woods had caught fire and both living and dead had been cremated. Some lay in attitudes denoting sudden death by bullet; but by far greater number in postures of agony that told of tormenting flame. Some were swollen to double girth; others shrivelled to manikins. Faces were bloated and black or yellow and shrunken. The contraction of

muscles which had given claws for hands had cursed each countenance with a hideous grin. Faugh!

Those fifteen hours have a grip on my soul to this day. The dark roiling forces of an unseen fate rolled across the plateau; I know what I saw: heroism go down to unutterable defeat before the ruthless idiocy of chance. For I believe that in the word "chance" we have the human name of a malign and soulless intelligence bestirring himself in earthly affairs with the brute unrest of Enceladus underneath his mountain.

History, noun.

An account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools.

Historian, noun.

A broad-gauge gossip.

—

Ghost, noun.

The outward and visible sign of an inward fear.

There is one insuperable obstacle to belief in ghosts. A ghost never comes naked: he appears either in a winding sheet or "in his habit as he died". To believe in him then is to believe that not only have the dead the power to make themselves visible after there is nothing left of them, but that the same power inheres in textile fabrics.

Supposing the products of the loom to have this ability, what object would they have in exercising it? And why does not the apparition of a suit of clothes sometimes walk about

without a ghost in it?

These be riddles of significance. They reach away down and get a convulsive grasp on the very taproot of this flourishing faith.

Grave, noun.

A place where the dead are laid to await the coming of the medical student.

Gravitation, noun.

The tendency of all bodies to approach one another with a strength proportioned to the quantity of matter they contain-- the quantity of matter they contain being ascertained by the strength of their tendency to approach one another. This is a lovely and edifying illustration of how science, having made A the proof of B, makes B the proof of A.

Geology, noun.

The geological formations of the globe are catalogued thus: The Primary, or lower one, consists of rocks, bones of mired mules, gas pipes, miners' tools, antique statues minus the nose, Spanish doubloons and ancestors. The Secondary is largely made up of red worms and moles. The Tertiary comprises railway tracks, patent pavements, grass, snakes, mouldy boots, beer bottles, tomato cans, intoxicated citizens, garbidge, Anarchists, snap-dogs and fools.

And Fools.

And fools. Chickamauga.

We'll skip Chickamauga for now.

Missionary Ridge. And on and on.

First a year.

...

Then another.

While serving in the 9th Indiana, I moved with the Army of the Cumberland as it continued South in its march of destruction. The enemy crossed our path at Kennesaw Mountain.

On the 23rd day of June, 1864, General Hazen wrote to his superior: I was ordered to advance my skirmish line, which I attempted to do by sending my topographical engineer, Lieutenant Bierce, to direct it and cause it to be done. While engaged in this duty, Lieutenant Bierce was shot in the head by a musket ball which caused a very dangerous and complicated wound, the ball remaining within the head from which it was removed sometime afterward.

Carried back to Hospital No. 1 at Chattanooga. We were all loaded on flat-cars covered with a tarp and left alone for hours with only the moon to commiserate with our agonies.

Went home to Elkhart, Indiana. I saw that it was still flat and dull, and was still unbearably warm in the summer.

The farms were rundown; the towns were deserted; my head was broken like a walnut.

...

I was finally mustered out of the army at Huntsville, Alabama in January, 1865. I was brevetted major in August by President Andrew Johnson, for "distinguished service during the war". The Brevet was of course purely honorary.

It had been my good fortune to command a

company of soldiers-- real soldiers. Not professional life-long fighters, the products of European militarism-- just plain ordinary American, volunteer soldiers, who loved their country and fought for it with never a thought of grabbing it for themselves; that is a trick which the survivors were taught by gentlemen desiring their votes.

Eventually moved West, West to San Francisco. Worked briefly at the U. S. Mint. Stayed in various rooming houses off Market Street, near the Mercantile Library. Read books and began to write for publications like the News-Letter whose managing editor was James Watkins. He taught me how to read. I discovered Swift and Voltaire. Shakespeare and Sir Thomas Browne. He taught me how to write.

In one letter to me he mentioned La Rochefoucauld, Murcer and Balzac and explained: "Your method of language is that of these Frenchmen; your method of thought, meanwhile, is essentially different from theirs; it is the real English (or American) thought and you give us the net result of its processes phrased with the Frenchman's wit and point and epigram.

I came to the conclusion that we think in words. We cannot think without them. Shallowness or obscurity of language means shallowness or obscurity of thought. To feel rightly one must think and know rightly. And so I took over the "Town Crier" column for the News-Letter and became a professional writer.

All in all this was the San Francisco of the Ancient & Honorable Order of the E. Clampus Vitus, whose motto is Credo Quia Absurdum (I believe because it is absurd), and whose members congregate at the Hall of Comparative Ovations; there are an endless

array of strange creatures and crested idiots here, like The Great Unknown, Old Rosey, the Money King, and all manner of egregious scalawags, Elks and Masons; this is the San Francisco of Emperor Norton the First, at whose death the Bulletin proclaimed: "The Emperor killed nobody, robbed nobody and deprived nobody of his country, which is more than can be said for most fellows in his trade".

And then there are the Holy Rollers:

Indeed, what a procession of holy idiots we have had in San Francisco-- hot gossellers and devil pelters of all degree! Thick-necked Moody with Sankey of the nasal name; Hallenbeck, Earle, Knops and all their he-harlotry of horrors. And now this grease-eating and salt-crusted Harrison from the pork regions of the Northeast, thinking holy hog and hominy and talking his teeth loose for the dissuasion of sinners from their natural diet of sin without which they would be sick! Can we do nothing to rid us of the periodical incursions of these scale-bugs-- these leaf worms-- these phyloxera of the moral vineyard? May the devil smite them with a tempest of sulfuric acid from his babcock extinguisher.

Pray, verb transitive.

To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.

Cabbage, I repeat: noun.

A familiar kitchen vegetable about as large and wise as a human head.

...

As for the likes of the Reverend Doughbrane, Reverend Twackbible Shrike and Brother Mortificationoftheflesh J. Mucker ...

No sane man of intelligence will plead for religion on the ground that it is better than nothing. It is not better than nothing if it is not true. Truth is better than anything, or all things; the next best thing to truth is absence of error. For no one but Jesus Christ ever loved mankind and look where it got him.

And look where it got him.

—

The sea-bird speeding from the realm of night
Dashed to death against the beacon light.
Learn from its evil fate, ambitious soul,
The ministry of light is guide, not goal.

As for politics.

Politician, noun.

An eel in the fundamental mud upon which the superstructure of organized society is reared.

Senate, noun.

A body of elderly gentlemen charged with high duties and misdemeanors.

As for California politics.

If nonsense were black Sacramento would need gas lamps on Monday morning. So scurvy a crew I do not remember outside the carcass of a dead horse. The frosty truth of the situation is that we are a state and a nation of benighted and boasting hypocrites, in whom the moral sense is as dead as Queen Anne at her dearest; that we are floundering and foundering in a sea of public and private corruption as offensive as that upon which the Ancient Mariner saw the shiny things that 'did crawl with legs'; that we are a laughing-stock to Europe and a menace to civilization.

I ask you, is it blasphemous to hold the mirror up to the blasphemer? Futile, futile, futile.

As for San Francisco.

There is so much hypocrisy among the god's elect in this city. There is even a political party now whose motto is simply, the Chinese must go.

The dead body of a Chinese woman was found last Tuesday morning lying across the sidewalk in a very uncomfortable position. The cause of her death could not be ascertained, but as her head was caved in it is thought by some physicians that she died of galloping Christianity of the malignant California type.

Only last Monday two little Christians (with a big C) were up before his Honor (with a big H) for pelting a Chinaman with rocks. On account of their youth, good character, color, nationality, religion, and the politics of their fathers, they were let off with a reprimand.

This is the kind of thing one finds in the majority of our newspapers.

To feel rightly one must think and know rightly.

Newspapers! They are faithful to nothing but the follies and vices of our system, while strenuously opposing every intelligent attempt at the elimination of these. Newspapers fetter the feet of wisdom and stiffen the prejudices of the ignorant.

They are sycophants to the mob, tyrants to the individual.

And tyrants to the individual.

—

Only last Tuesday a Chinaman passing guilelessly along Dupont Street was assailed with a tempest of bricks and stones from the steps of the First Congregational Church. At the completion of this devotional exercise the Sunday scholars retired within the hallowed portals of the sanctuary, to hear about Christ Jesus, and him crucified.

O, Lord, who for the purposes of this supplication we assume to have created the heavens and earth before man created thee; and who, let us say, art from everlasting to everlasting; we beseech thee to turn thy attention this way and behold a set of the most abandoned scalawags Thou has ever had the pleasure of setting eyes on. But in consideration of the fact that thou sentest thy only-begotten Son among us, and afforded us the felicity of murdering him, we would respectfully suggest the propriety of taking into heaven such of us as pay our church dues, giving us an eternity of exalted laziness and absolutely inconceivable fun. We ask this in the name of thy Son whom we strung up as before stated. Amen.

—

The ministry of light is guide not goal.
[He coughs: the old asthma]

—

In London, they call the air smog, after the combination of smoke and fog; given the blend of dust and fog in San Francisco, I propose we call it 'Dog'.

Alone, adjective.
Bad company.

Defenseless, adjective.

Unable to attack.

Self-evident, adjective.

Evident to one's self and to nobody else.

—

Meekness, noun.

Uncommon patience in planning a revenge that is worthwhile.

M is for Moses

 who slew the Egyptian.

As sweet as a rose is

The meekness of Moses.

No monument shows his

 port-mortem inscription

But M is for Moses

 who slew the Egyptian.

Medicine, noun.

A stone flung down the Bowery
to kill a dog in Broadway.

M is for Mollie.

—

The facts about how and when I met Mollie Day are lost. There are no letters, no love poems, no story of the meeting or the courting. The earliest hint of acquaintance appears in the Crier's column of February 5, 1870: "Mollie, tell your mother not to relax her efforts to keep you from writing us. The chances are the old lady is right."

Around this time I wrote and published my first story, THE HAUNTED VALLEY, about a gnarled and vicious and xenophobic miner who had murdered his Chinese assistant (perhaps a transvestite) in a jealous rage after suspecting him or her of developing a passion for another miner.

....

Spent a lot of time picnicking, boating and walking in the hills of San Raphael. No doubt the Days disapproved of me, as well they should. The News-Letter received a series of taunting resolutions from such female suffragers as Eliza Straitlace, Jane Squinteye, and Medora Sawnose to the following effect:

THAT whereas the implacable reviler of women and the marriage relation ...

... be caught in the pit which he himself digged;

THAT the sympathies of this society and of the world are bestowed upon the heroic woman who has offered herself a victim upon the altar of that dreadful being's desire to be received into good society;

THAT for her unsuspected, unheralded, and unsurpassed disinterestedness she ought to be relieved at an early date from the purgatory of such a marital existence, into the haven of widowhood;

THAT he is no better than he should be;

THAT it serves him right.

Mollie's father was an old New York Dutchman by the name of Holland Hines Day; he'd struck it rich with the Tintic Mine near Salt Lake City; he did not oppose the match; in fact, Mister Day promised the newlyweds an all expenses trip to London. A promise which was duly executed.

Love, noun.

A temporary insanity curable by marriage.

—

In this city, married, December 25th, 1871, by
Horatio Stebbins, Ambrose G. Bierce and Mary
E. Day.

They stood before the altar and supplied
The fire themselves in which their fat was fried.
In vain the sacrifice! No god will claim
An offering burnt with an unholy flame.

Bride, noun. A woman with a fine prospect of
happiness behind her.

—

My farewell to the News-Letter appeared on
March 9th, 1872:

With this number of the News-Letter the
present writer's connection with it ceases for at
least a brief season. That he has always been
entertaining he does not claim, that he has
been uniformly good natured is no further true
than that he has refrained from actually killing
anybody; that he has been 'genial' is not true
at all. It must be pretty evident that in
penning some six or eight thousand
paragraphs he must have told a great number
of harmless lies and perpetrated divers cruel
slanders. For the former he is responsible to
his maker, and shall offer no apology; for the
latter no apologies would avail, even if he were
in the humor of making them-- which he is not.

Be as decent as you can. Don't believe without
evidence. Treat divine things with respect--
don't have anything to do with them. Do not
trust humanity without collateral security; it
will play you some scurvy trick. Remember

that it hurts no one to be treated as an enemy entitled to respect until he shall prove himself a friend worthy of affection. Cultivate a taste for distasteful truths. And, finally, most important of all, endeavor to see things as they are, not as they ought to be.

—

I liked London. I liked England, and acquired some of the mannerisms of that proud race. Wrote under the pseudonym of "Dod Grile". Somehow it didn't catch on the way "Mark Twain" did. My two sons, Leigh and Day, were born there. Did tolerably well, but never made enough money. The weather was hell on my asthma which became worse.

Met a lot of the best English writers: Tom Hood, the editor of Fun; and John Cambden Hotten, publisher of both Twain and Artemus Ward. It was Hotten who suggested I publish my first two books: Nuggets and Dust and Cobwebs from an Empty Skull. The Fiend's Delight followed in 1874. Had a great deal to worry about: more work than I could do; Mollie having two babies and a nursemaid to look after. Yes, up to my ears in work, grinding stuff for five publications: one semi-weekly, two weeklies, one monthly, and one occasional-- a pizen thing of which I wrote every line.

In the Spring of 1875 my wife decided to return to America; when she got there I got word she was once more pregnant. If this had not been the case I probably should have stayed, but no.

...

When John Hotten died, shortly before my own departure, a group of his friends gathered to

see who could come up with the best epitaph:

? Any Guess?

Hotten. Rotten. Forgotten.

Actually, adverb.
Perhaps; possibly.

Really, adverb.
Apparently.

White, adjective.
Black.

Returned home in the fall of 1875 and spent most of the winter with wife and children in San Francisco, where we lived at the home of Mr and Mrs Day on Vallejo Street.

Took a brief holiday in December to Calistoga Hot Springs, and spent time in Napa. Began to think about my experiences. In the war. In the woods. In England I had almost forgotten about the strangeness of the woods.

He to whom the portentous conspiracy of night and silence and solitude in the heart of a great forest is not an unknown experience needs not to be told what another world it all is. How even the most commonplace and familiar objects take on another character....

There are sounds without a name, forms without substance, translation in space of objects which have not been seen to move, movements wherein nothing is observed to change its place. Ah, children of the sunlight

and the gaslight, how little you know of the world in which you live.

Surrounded at a little distance by armed and watchful friends Byring felt utterly alone. Yielding himself to the solemn and mysterious spirit of the time and place, he had forgotten the nature of his connection with the visible and audible aspects and phases of the night. The forest was boundless; men and the habitations of men did not exist. The universe was one primeval mystery of darkness without form and void, himself the sole, dumb questioner of its eternal secret. Absorbed in thoughts born of this mood, he suffered the time to slip away unnoted. Meantime the infrequent patches of white light lying amongst the tree-trunks had undergone changes of size, form and place. In one of them near by, just at the roadside, his eye fell upon an object that he had not previously observed. It was almost before his face as he sat; he could have sworn that it had not before been there. It was partly covered in shadow, but he could see that it was a human figure. Instinctively he adjusted the clasp of his sword-belt and laid hold of his pistol-- again he was in a world of war, by occupation an assassin.

The figure did not move. Rising, pistol in hand he approached. The figure lay upon its back, the upper part in shadow, but standing above it and looking down upon the face, he saw that it was a dead body. He shuddered and turned from it with a feeling of sickness and disgust, resumed his seat upon the log, and forgetting military prudence struck a match and lit a cigar. In the sudden blackness that followed the extinction of the flame he felt a sense of relief; he could no longer see the object of his aversion. Nevertheless, he kept his eyes set in that direction until it appeared again with growing distinctness. It seemed to have moved

a trifle nearer.

Damn that thing, he muttered. What does it want?

Early the next morning a fatigue-party, commanded by a captain and accompanied by a surgeon, searched the ground for dead and wounded. At the fork of the road, a little to one side, they found two bodies lying close together-- that of a Federal officer and that of a Confederate private. The officer had died of a sword thrust through the heart, but not apparently, until he had inflicted upon his enemy no fewer than five dreadful wounds. The dead officer lay on his face in a pool of blood, the weapon still in his breast. They turned him on his back, and the surgeon removed it.

Gad, said the captain, it is Byring, adding with a glance at the other, they had a tough tussle.

The surgeon examined the sword. It was that of a line officer of the Federal infantry-- exactly like the one worn by the captain. It was, in fact, Byrings' own. The only other weapon found was an undischarged revolver in the dead officer's belt.

The surgeon looked at the captain. The captain looked at the surgeon.

—

A man stood upon a railroad bridge at Owl Creek, in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were tied behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope loosely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head, and the slack fell to the level of his knees

....

Worm's meat, noun.

The finished product of which we are the raw material.

Rear, noun.

In military parlance, that part of the army that is closest to Congress.

Youth, noun.

The period of possibility, when Archimedes finds a fulcrum, Cassandra has a following and seven cities compete for the honor of endowing a living Homer.

Youth is the true Saturnian reign, the Golden Age on earth again, when figs are grown on thistles, and pigs betailed with whistles, wearing silver bristles, live ever in clover, and cows fly overhead, delivering milk at every door, and justice never is heard to snore, and every assassin is made a ghost, and howling, is cast into Baltimore.

Unamerican, adjective.

Wicked, intolerable, heathenish.

...

(This definition, you will please note, has become general.)

Zeus, noun.

The chief of the Grecian gods, adored by the Romans as Jupiter, and by the modern Americans as God, Gold, Mob and Dog.

W (double U) has, of all the letters in our alphabet, the only cumbrous name, the names of the others being monosyllabic. There can be no doubt whatever that by simplifying the name

of W our civilization could be, if not promoted,
at least, better endured.

Calling it "wow" for example.

—

The Moral Principle and the Material Interest.

A Moral Principle met a Material Interest on a
bridge wide enough for but one.

Down you base thing, thundered the
Moral Principle, let me pass over you.

The Material Interest merely looked into
the other's eyes without saying anything.

Ah, said the Moral Principle hesitatingly,
let us draw lots to see which shall retire till the
other has crossed.

The Material Interest maintained an
unbroken silence and an unwavering stare.

In order to avoid a conflict, the Moral
Principle resumed somewhat uneasily, I shall
myself lie down and let you walk over me.

Then the Material Interest found a
tongue, and by a strange coincidence it was its
own tongue.

I don't think you are very good walking,
it said, I am a little particular about what I have
underfoot. Suppose you get off into the water.

It occurred that way.

In the winter of 1889 I made an accidental
discovery of some love letters written to Mollie
by a certain Danish gentleman who had been
summering in St Helena. I told her, I don't take
part in competitions-- even in love.

There was a scene.

She swore to me that there was nothing to it,
that there was no real romance. I would not
listen to her, and moved my things to Sunol.
She was the only woman I ever loved.

Once in St Helena the local pastor came to call on Mrs Bierce. Young Leigh ran in from the garden and remarked, Daddy, I just heard Day (my other son) say "Damn god". The pastor and Mrs Bierce were properly horrified, but my only comment was: My child, how many times have I told you not to say "Damn god" when you mean "God damn".

Mollie Day was the prettiest girl in San Francisco-- she was beautiful and kind.

Nothing matters, nothing matters, nothing matters.

A few months after I left Mrs Bierce Day fell in love with Eva Adkins, a girl from out in Chico. He proposed marriage. She hesitated, but he knew how to apply the pressure, and on her mother's advice, the Adkins girl finally gave in. Day applied for a license, found a minister and invited a few guests, for the wedding to be held July 22nd.

But the Adkins girl slipped out of the house by a ruse and eloped with Neil Hubbs, Day's best friend. They hopped a southbound train and were married on, you guessed it, July 22nd at French Camp. The local paper, the ENTERPRISE, had a field day with it: 'With a Handsomer Man! Course of True Love Runs Amuck'.

Two days later the newlyweds returned, and Day greeted them at the train station.

Day had a revolver, and he used the damn thing.

Both boys began shooting, Hubbs fell mortally wounded. Then Day took a shot at Eva, shot part of her ear off. But he too had been wounded, staggered back to the hotel, crawled to his rented room, got on the bed, put another cartridge into his pistol, laid a cloth saturated with chloroform over his face, then placing the pistol to his right temple, fired it, blowing his brains out over the counterpane.

Both had begun to shoot at the same time, both died. At Sacramento the two boys parted company: Day's body was sent to St Helena and Hubbs' to Stockton. The Adkins girl stood on the platform, one ear clipped off by the bullet, and remarked to reporters: Now ain't that funny-- one goes one way, one goes another.

....

If any one reading the account in the Chico ENTERPRISE, thinks I did wrong in marrying Hubbs at the time I did, let them consider what they would do were they a sixteen year old girl and placed as I was.

Day Bierce was sixteen years and eight months old.

But the newspapers weren't done with the business. My old boss at the ARGONAUT, Frank Pixley, printed an editorial asking whether the death of Day were not retribution for the father's "Bitter, heartless and unprovoked assaults".

....

"Does there not rest upon his father a ...

haunting fear lest he may have transmuted to a sensitive and tender soul an inheritance which resulted in crime and death, while he was cultivating the gift of wounding natures just as sensitive and tender, who had not the courage to end them in murder and self-destruction?"
Blah blah blah ...

When Pixley died-- some time later regrettably-- I composed a short epitaph:

Here Lies Frank Pixley-- As usual.

—

Cabbage, noun.

....

Reminds me.

—

... and then there is the matter of William Randolph Hearst, who I had only just met, it seems, around the time of all these ghastly ... removals.

I was in my rented studio in Oakland, away from the family, when I heard a knock on the door.

I found a young man, the youngest man, it seemed to me, that I had ever confronted. His appearance, his attitude, his entire personality suggested extreme diffidence. I did not ask him in, instate him in my better chair (I had two) and inquire how we might serve each other.

If my memory is not at fault, I merely said, well, and awaited the result.

I am from the San Francisco Examiner, he

exclaimed in a voice like the fragrance of violets made audible, and backed a little away.

Oh, I said, you come from Mister Hearst.

Then that unearthly child lifted its blue eyes and cooed: I am Mister Hearst.

....

The rest is a matter of historical record. I became the "Prattler", for the princely sum of thirty-five dollars a week.

Already in those days, I had been thinking over the problem of corruption in high places, and the way in which our democratic system seemed especially vulnerable in this regard. Of course, I had had some practice in this doleful study.

Back in '77 I had written of President Hayes: Lincoln and Grant were each difficult creatures to admire, but Hayes-- Hayes is only a magic lantern without even a surface to be displayed upon. You cannot see him, you cannot feel him; but you know that he extends in lessening opacity all the way from the dark side of John Sherman (the Senator from Ohio) to the confines of outer space.

And more recently-- in the same vein: When a prominent industrialist, Anthony Chabot, died I observed-- The personal property of the late Anthony Chabot of Oakland has been ordered sold. This is a noble opportunity to obtain Senator Vrooman.

....

No solution, political or revolutionary is possible: majorities, embracing as they do the most ignorant, seldom think rightly; public opinion being the opinion of mediocrity is commonly a mistake and a mischief. The result is that the public writer and public speaker alike find their

account in confirming the masses in their
brainless errors and brutish prejudices-- in
glutting their omnivorous vanity and in
inflaming their implacable race and national
hatreds.

Patriotism is fierce as a fever, pitiless as the
grave, blind as a stone, and as irrational as a
headless hen.

M is for Moses
 who slew the Egyptian.
As sweet as a rose is
The meekness of Moses.
No monument shows his
 post-mortem inscription,
But M is for Moses
 who slew the Egyptian.

Compulsion, noun.
The eloquence of power.

Duty, noun.
That which sternly impels us in the direction of
profit, along the line of desire.
...

Day, noun.
A period of twenty-four hours, mostly misspent.

Things livened up a bit in early 1896; Hearst
wired me from New York: Railroad combination
so strong in Washington that seems almost
impossible to break them up, yet it is certainly
the duty of all having interests of coast at heart
to make the most strenuous efforts. Will you
please go to Washington for the Examiner?

I replied.

I shall be glad to do whatever I can toward defeating Mr Huntington's Funding Bill and shall start for Washington on Monday evening next.

Collis P. Huntington was the sole surviving appendage of the Bay Area Big Four-- tycoons and swindlers-- that had included Mark Hopkins, Charles Crocker, and Leland Stanford, by 1896 the latter three all mercifully dead.

The Southern Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads had been built using public monies loaned out at a reasonable rate of interest. The railroad men had enriched themselves enormously, at public expense, and had failed to make anything more than token repayment of either interest or principle (an amount conservatively estimated at seventy-five million dollars).

Mr Huntington's Funding Bill was a ruse not merely intended to delay repayment for another thirty years, but in effect to assure that the issue of repayment would never be forced. The chief lobbyist for the corrupt and depraved railroad contingent in congress was one John Boyd, whom I referred to as Huntington's tapeworm.

My first article began: Mr Huntington is not altogether bad. Though severe, he is merciful. He tempers invective with falsehood. That is, although he says ugly things of the enemy, he has the tenderness to be careful that they are mainly lies.

Mr Huntington appeared before the Committee and took his hands out of all pockets long enough to be sworn.

The spectacle of this old man standing on the brink of eternity, his pockets loaded with dishonest gold which he knows neither how to enjoy nor to whom to bequeath was one of the most pitiable it has been my lot to observe. He knows himself an outmate of every penal institution in the world; he deserves to hang from every branch of every tree of every state and territory penetrated by his railroads, with the sole exception of Nevada, which has no trees.

I called him an inflated old pigskin.

I called him a veteran calumniator.

I called him a promoted peasant.

I called him the swine of the century.

Of our modern forty thieves, Mister Huntington is the surviving thirty-six.

One day I encountered Mister Huntington on the steps of the Capitol.

Previously I had declined Huntington's hand in a committee session. It was once more offered. Met with stony rejection Huntington finally shouted: Well, name your price; every man has a price.

My price is seventy-five million dollars, and you might make it payable to my good friend, the Secretary of the Treasury.

Later on someone asked the old reptile why he

had approached me. Oh, I just wanted to see how big he was. And then added, now I know.

But that was the mauve decade. Once at the home of a western family who had recently acquired a vast fortune, I was admonished by the hostess to notice her "spinal" staircase.

In January 1897 the Funding Bill was defeated and I returned to San Francisco.

But I was tired of journalism; and I was getting tired of Hearst; and Hearst, in his turn, was getting tired of me. Our quarrel began over the man of the hour, and the savior proclaimed by all the Hearst papers, William Jennings Bryan.

Of whom I wrote.

Mister Bryan's creation was the unstudied act of his own larynx; it said, Let there be Bryan and there was Bryan.

To the Hearst flunkies I was coming to be just an eccentric gentleman whose whim must be humored if possible, although there is no penalty if I am treated with disrespect. And I was treated with disrespect: The idiots began to edit me, me! Can you believe it?

Grammar, noun. A system of pitfalls thoughtfully prepared for the feet of the self-made man, along the path by which he advances to distinction.

Diaphragm, noun.

A muscular partition separating disorders of the chest, from disorders of the bowels.

Dejeuner, noun.

The breakfast of an American who has been in Paris, variously pronounced.

—

My name is Boffer Bings. I was born of honest parents in one of the humbler walks of life, my father being a manufacturer of dog-oil and my mother having a small studio in the shadow of the village church where she disposed of unwelcome babes. In my boyhood I was trained to habits of industry; I not only assisted my father in procuring dogs for his vats, but was frequently employed by my mother to carry away the debris of her work in the studio.

My father has, as silent partners, all the physicians of the town, who seldom wrote a prescription which did not contain what they were pleased to designate as Oil of Dog. It is really the most valuable medicine ever discovered. But most persons are unwilling to make personal sacrifice for the afflicted, and it was evident that many of the fattest dogs in town were forbidden to play with me-- a fact which pained my young sensibilities, and at one time came near driving me to become a pirate....

—

My father was a deodorizer of dead dogs, my mother kept the only shop for the sale of cat's meat in my native city. They did not live happily; the difference in social rank was a chasm which could not be bridged by the vows

of marriage. One morning after the customary squabbles at breakfast my father rose from the table, quivering and pale with wrath, and proceeding to the parsonage thrashed the clergyman who had performed the marriage ceremony...

—

Resolutions of Congress, February 15, 1862.
Resolved, That the thanks of Congress are due, and hereby tendered, to Brigadier-General Jupiter Doke and the gallant men under his command for their unparalleled feat of attacking-- themselves only 2000 strong-- a Confederate army of 25,000 and utterly overthrowing it, killing 5327, making prisoners of 19,003, of whom more than half were wounded, taking 32 guns, 20,000 stand of small arms and, in short, the enemy's entire equipment.

Resolved, That for his unexampled victory the President be requested to designate a day of thanksgiving and public celebration of religious rites in the various churches.

Resolved, That he be requested, in further commemoration of the great event, and in reward of the gallant spirits whose deeds have added such imperishable lustre to the American arms, to appoint, with the advice and consent of the Senate the following officer:

One Major-General.

Statement of Mister Hannibal Alcazar Peyton, of Jayhawk, Kentucky.

Dat wus a almighty dark night, sho' and dese yere ole eyes ain't wuf shucks, but I's got a year like a sque'l, an' w'en I cotch de mummeer o' v'ices I knowed dat gang b'long on de far

side o' de ribber. So I jes' runs in de house an' wakes Marse Doke an' tells him: "Skin outer 'dis fo' yo' life! It's de Johnny Rebs! An' de Lo' bress my soul! ef dat man didn' go right fru de winder in his shir'tail an' break for to cross de mule patch! An dem twenty-free hunerd mules dey jes' t'ink it is de debble hese'f wid de brandin' iron, an' dey bu'st outen dat patch like a yarth quake, an' pile inter de upper ford road, an' flash down it five deep, an' it full o' Confed'rates from en' to en'!...

Happiness, noun.

An agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of another.

Hades, noun.

The place where the dead live.

Harangue, noun.

A speech by an opponent, who is known as a harangue-outang.

Nothing matters, nothings matters.

I ricocheted back and forth from one coast to the other, seeking to avoid in one what had lately most repelled me in the other.

I achieved a certain notoriety.

They began to call me the West Coast Samuel Johnson, I suppose for my Devil's Dictionary (which could not even be published under that name, but was issued as The Cynic's Wordbook.

Who but a failed critic would read anything with so lame an appellation? At any rate, if I remain unimpressed by the good Doctor Johnson I confess the problem lies in his definition of patriotism as "the last refuge of a scoundrel".

This is incorrect.

I beg to submit it is the first.

—

How many times, and covering 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 [sic] may be said to be world wide and apparently everlasting.

Upon the death of my second son, Leigh, who froze to death during a winter storm after an alcoholic binge, I wrote to a friend: I am hit hard; more than you can guess-- am a bit broken and gone gray of it.

—

I am leading a life of mere waiting-- waiting for nothing in particular, except the end of it all. I do no work that I care to do-- just the work that keeps me living-- for I've no incentive, no ambition but to go on with as little friction as possible. (Why did not God make us with ball-bearings?)

President Theodore Roosevelt, a man I despised for his mediocrity and war mongering, invited me to the White House.

I declined on the grounds that I never neglect old friends to make new.

This delighted Roosevelt who promptly wrote to me: I quite agree with you. Come to-night, and let us be old friends.

What could I do? After all, he was the President.

Presidency, noun.

The greased pig in the field game of American politics.

Things went well enough till after dinner. The President showed me the famous picture of San Juan Hill. When asked what I thought of it, I replied it is inaccurate since it depicts you, Mister President, at San Juan when in truth you were not there.

Hearst got it into his head to sponsor a debate at a New York hotel between two socialists, Morris Hilquitt and John Hunter-- and myself. Hunter had just published a book called POVERTY and opened the discussion with statistics. I challenged the statistics, as I would challenge all organized lies, lies organized by whatever mechanical system. But all agreed a great deal of poverty existed. Socialism was proposed as a solution.

I said: I don't see that there is any remedy for a condition which consists in the rich being on top, or rather the strongest being on top. They always will be.

Now don't understand me as defending that system, and I am referring to the evils of unregulated industrialism. I wish I could

abolish it. I only say it is inevitable and incurable. Nothing touches me more than poverty; I have been poor myself.

In this country every man has a vote. If he is not satisfied with conditions as they are, why doesn't he change them? If the working man and the poor are in the majority, why don't they get together? Because they haven't sense enough. They can have any laws or system they want.

The poor do not have a monopoly on all the virtues.

The general idea among the sons of discontent is that the prosperous are dishonest and the unprosperous are honest. If that is so, abolition of poverty is a nefarious business.

I don't believe in the greatest good to the greatest number-- it seems to me perfect rot. I do believe in the greatest good to the best. And I would sacrifice a thousand incapable men to elevate one really good person.

Hunter said: And a dictator will bring revolution.

I said: Sure.

He said: The people alone are unconquerable.

The people, I replied, are always doing silly things. They sail in and out of great affairs, and shed a lot of blood and they are back where they were before.

He said: You think civilization has not accomplished anything in recent years. (He was smiling as he said that, the ass.)

It has accomplished everything, I said, but it has not made humanity any happier. Happiness is the only thing worth having. I find happiness in looking at poor men in the same way I do in looking at the ants in an anthill. And I find happiness in looking at the capitalist. I don't care what he does, nor what the others do. It pleases me to look at them. Each man is concerned with his own happiness. Nothing matters, don't you see?

Hey, some of my best friends are socialists.

I have a socialist friend, a writer by the name of Jack London. Some one alleged to him, incorrectly, that I had said something not flattering about his work. London replied, For heaven's sake don't quarrel with Ambrose about me. He crystallized before you and I were born; and it is a magnificent crystallization.

He stopped growing a generation ago. Of course he keeps up with the newspapers, but his criteria crystallized thirty odd years ago. Had he been born a generation later, he'd have been born a socialist, and more likely an anarchist. He never reads books that aren't a hundred years old, and he glories in the fact.

—

Me, a socialist! Or an ANARCHIST!
Can you imagine it? I can't.

—

As for Hearst, when I think of him now ... I see him: Silent and smiling, he moves among men, the loneliest man. Nobody but god loves him, and he knows it; and god's love he values only in so far as he fancies that it may promote his amusing ambition to darken the door of the White House. As to that I think he would be the kind of President that this country-- daft

with democracy and sick with sin-- is beginning to deserve.

I am sure it must be wrong for whole nations to be wicked. But in this worst of all possible worlds it does seem as if ethical considerations had no more weight than that to which their beauty entitles them. That may well not be, but despite the principle so dear to the hearts of the worthy gentlemen who lift protesting hands when the rights of the weak nations are invaded by strong ones, not a people on earth today has a right to be there. All have dispossessed some other people.

Occident, noun.

The part of the world lying west (or east) of the Orient. It is largely inhabited by Christians, a powerful subtribe of the Hypocrites, whose principle industries are murder and cheating which they are pleased to call "war" and "commerce". These, also, are the principle industries of the Orient.

Property, noun.

Any natural thing, having no particular value, that may be held by A against the cupidity of B. Whatever gratifies the passion for possession in one and disappoints it in all others. The object of a man's brief rapacity and long indifference.

Hash, unknown.

There is no definition of the word. No one knows what hash is.

Back in Washington and Sag Harbor. Motor boating and so forth. I'm still playing at asthma. It isn't much of a game; I prefer draw

poker. But asthma is cheaper.

On April 27th 1905 Mollie E. Bierce died "of a broken heart" it is said, only a few months after divorce was granted, on the grounds of desertion.



Some kind soul had conveyed to her,
incorrectly, of my desire for a divorce.

Mollie Day was beautiful and kind.

Nothing matters, nothing matters, nothing
matters.



Against my better judgement I was convinced
by my friend Walter Neale to assemble a
collected works.

The prospectus was detailed, the work of
correction and revision painstaking and difficult.

An autograph edition of all twelve volumes was
bound in brown, Levantine leather, silk lined
and with ornaments and lettering in 22 carat
gold. One hundred and twenty dollars a set.
An edition deluxe.

None of my journalism was included. For the
good reason that I have always despised the
whole damn enterprise.

The reviews were what you would expect: "A
depressing assemblage of worn-out and fly-
blown stuff. Except from the upholsterer's point
of view they are not books at all" (Mencken).

"Potatoes set in platinum" (Wilson Follett).

"Turnips in Tiffany's window" (Richard O'Connor).

—

We think in words. We cannot think without them. Shallowness or obscurity of speech means shallowness or obscurity of thought.

To feel rightly one must think and know rightly.
Cabbage, noun.

...

—

After the debacle of my collected works, I got restless.

I got restless, read about the situation in Mexico; looks like a real fight; it's about time; I've corresponded with this Carranza fellow, and I like him; I've decided to go down to Juarez and view the scene for myself.

—

O, Lawyer Tum Suden
I beg you'll be quiet:
Don't always be broodin'
On causes of riot.

For any poor sinner
to nature a debtor
A salad for dinner
With peace is far better,

The Sacred Affiant
Is careful to mention
Than any stalled client
And therewith contention.

So stop your intrudin'
On sluggers, I say,
O, Lawyer Tum Suden
Tum Duden, Tum Day.

Had a lot of letters to write before my
departure.

To a young Admirer (Nellie Stickler): We shall
never meet, so let me offer a little advice.

Well ...

But you are happy and that is all that it is worth
to be. Nothing else is of any value-- just
happiness. The difference between a good
person and a bad one is that one finds
happiness in goodness; the other in badness;
but consciously or unconsciously happiness is all
they seek or can seek. Even self-sacrifice is a
species of self-indulgence. And at the end of it
we see that nothing matters.

To Mollie E. Day

...

Picture, noun.
A representation in two dimensions of
something wearisome in three.

Resident, noun.
Unable to leave.

Talk, verb transitive.
To commit an indiscretion without temptation,
from an impulse without purpose.

To my daughter, Helen, January 27th, 1913:

Dear Bib, You are well provided for, and my proofreading stunt-- four years of it-- is over. In America you can't go East or West anymore, or North, the only avenue of escape is South. I'm going back to Washington and make preparations to leave. I'll take some letters with me and strike the border near El Paso. It will be easy enough to get along. I'm going to buy a donkey and hire a peon. I can see what's doing; perhaps write a few articles about the situation; and then pass to the west coast of Mexico. From there I can go to South America, cross the Andes and ship to England. This fighting in Mexico interests me. I want to go down there and see if these Mexicans can shoot straight.

Dear Mollie ...

Death marked me at Kennesaw Mountain ...

Ah, how beautiful she is! He springs forward with extended arms. As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of his neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon-- then all is darkness and silence.

Peyton Farquahar is dead; his body, with a broken neck, swings gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge.

All this we see.

Fade to Black.

End of play.

—

Coda:

Applause, noun.
The echo of a platitude.

Critic, noun.
A person who boasts himself hard to please
because nobody tries to please him.

—

Congratulation, noun.
The civility of envy.

—

End of play (again).