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AMBROSE BIERCE AT HOME

BY HELEN BIERCE

A WARRIOR who slept in his armor and never furled his banner—that is the way many men think of my father. He was a warrior, I know it, but I suppose every warrior has a home-life, and it is there in our home that I always like to picture him. I knew of his battles, of course—I even sallied forth on some of his minor skirmishes with him—but the warring side of him did not impress me much.

He was a home-loving man, fonder of his own hearthside than of anything else in the world. One of my earliest recollections is of his collection of pine-cones, marvellous to a child. On his library shelves there were rows and rows of them, gathered from all over Northern California. When I was good I was invited in to help make the pine-needle pillows he gave to his friends. Sometimes I was also taken on jaunts into the woods to look for Indian arrow-heads. It was not until after many years that I realized that he had one of the best collections of arrow-heads in the West. What became of them I do not know; possibly they are now lying in some museum marked Collector Unknown.

We were living near San Francisco then, and arrow-heads were not difficult to find. My father had chanced upon most of his himself, but a few were bought from boys of the neighborhood, or from fishermen or hunters, and some were given him by friends. Jake Tunstead, the

sheriff of Marin county, was one of his friends who was always bringing them in.

Those were heroic times in the Far West and the sheriff's business was the shooting of bad men; but now and then, on off-days, when no saloons were being shot to pieces or Chinamen strung up by bandits, he would go out and gather up a few of "them danged things fer the Major." He was in the habit of sticking his head in at one or another of our windows at the most unexpected moments and bawling, "Hey, Major, lookit what I gotcha!", or "Hey, Major, let's go huntin'."

He bawled out such a suggestion for a hunt one afternoon when my mother was giving a tea and when she answered him timidly that Father was not at home, he swung his leg over the sill and climbed into the room. Then he saw the tea-party and was properly flabbergasted. But he was a public officer and must carry on, so he fumbled around and got his hat off, fell over a foot-stool and remarked in a voice that sounded like thunder in the High Sierras that it was a warm day. He weakened and gave it up when Mother handed him an egg-shell teacup that was not as large as the badge pinned to his suspenders; in a frantic rush he escaped to the great outdoors, to wait for my father.

Most of the writers who came to San Francisco visited us at our home, whether

in San Mateo or Santa Cruz. Mark Twain was there often, and I used to think as a little girl that he even slept with his pipe in his mouth, but he was kindly and told us stories, so I was sorry when he went away. Bret Harte, for some reason I don't know, never came out to the house, but I met him and Jack London several times when I went into town to lunch with Father. And when I was very small I thought that Joaquin Miller and George Sterling were members of the family, for they were always at the house. Looking backward, I can understand how my father could have admired these men and their work, but his friendship for Robert Louis Stevenson has ever been a mystery to me.

I don't know just when they met, but it was before Stevenson's marriage to Mrs. Osbourne. When my father met her, some time after the wedding, he came away radiant with new-born hopes for his friend. He told us that if anyone could make Rob take care of himself and get over that terrible cough it would be this lovely and capable wife.

But Stevenson had another one of his periodical breakdowns shortly after his marriage and his wife and her son took him out into the wilderness. They rented an old wreck of a cabin at the famous Silverado mining-camp, not far from Mount Saint Helena, and there Father saw them a great deal, for he was also in retreat at the time in those mountains, trying to subdue an attack of asthma. When the family went back to Europe he corresponded with them regularly, and he joined them in Samoa for several weeks' visit not long before Stevenson's death.

It has always seemed strange to me that my father, whose pen was the most caustic, the most dreaded and feared of his

day, should have formed such a genuine attachment for this weaver of beautiful fantasies. Father, to be sure, also wove a few fantasies himself (his poems, short stories, and such), but his fame was made as a fire-eater—was founded upon his newspaper columns of comment on the world of affairs, and he had no room there for the fanciful.

II

Our home was broken up by one tragedy after another. My brother Day went up the State to Chico to edit a paper and we had hardly grown accustomed to sitting down to dinner without him when the news arrived of his death. W. R. Hearst, Ed Kaufman and Father left at once for Chico, and Mr. Hearst told me the story afterward, for Father never wanted to talk about it.

It seems that the poor boy—he was only seventeen—had been having his first love-affair and that when he learned the girl was only laughing at him and was planning to marry a man twenty years older he lost his head. He challenged his rival to a gun duel and they were both killed. Father listened grimly, standing alongside the body of his boy. He stared at it silently for a moment, and then said softly, "Well done, my son. You did as I would have had you do!" That closed the episode for Father. He never spoke of it again.

After this came his greatest tragedy—his misunderstanding with my mother. His adoration of her had been wonderful. She was exactly his ideal of a wife; she was gentle, good and beautiful. I worshipped her too, and so did my brothers—and so did another man. This much-discussed affair has never been given right treatment, for Father would not talk of it, of course, and his biographers have

written sentimentally of his "unhappy, short marriage," and all that sort of thing. I believe that, without injustice to anyone, I can tell what really happened.

According to the stories, mother turned an unheeding ear to the words of her admirer, and he wooed her in vain with ardent love-letters, one of which Father found, and being unable to forgive her for merely receiving it, left her forever. But that is only a half-truth. Mother was really rather charmed by this stranger, a wealthy and famous Dane. It was a decorous and discreet fascination, but—she had certainly not sent him back to Denmark up to the time Father found the letter.

Father was her ideal to her dying day (she told me so), but—he wrote all night and slept half the day; he brooded alone by himself most of the time, sitting motionless and wordless by the library fire; he took long walks in the woods making friends with the birds, learning to imitate their calls, and becoming so intimate with them that they gathered in clouds upon his outstretched arms and his head.

I believe it was his lack of understanding, of sympathy, of appreciation for women that caused the trouble. He was the soul of sincerity in all he wrote, but I feel somehow that with women it was different. He expected too little of them mentally. He had the ancients' view of them as chattels, demanding of them fidelity and service, but it never occurred to him to *think* with them.

Perhaps "never" is too strong a word, for there were a few women whom he considered clever—George Eliot, for instance. He attended her famous salons when he lived in London, and years later he told me that although in person she was anything but fascinating, one forgot this the moment she began to talk. He said that no woman could talk with

greater charm than she. And then there was Gertrude Atherton: he thought her one of the greatest women of her time and used to marvel at the lucidity of her thinking. But he accounted for her talent by saying she had a masculine way of marshalling her ideas! She was an intimate friend, and very beautiful.

Nor must I forget the Empress Eugénie, whom he took to be extremely clever as well as charmingly feminine. During his long talks with her while they were planning the *Lantern*, that magazine of his whose two issues vanquished her enemy, Henri Rochefort, her thoughts were as keen as sword-blades and true to the point every time, he said. When Rochefort gave up his persecution of her and fled to Belgium she expressed her appreciation of my father's championship in one of the prettiest speeches he had ever heard. She also presented him with a carved ivory card-case for himself and a most exquisite carved ivory cross for Mother. The cross and case are still among my treasures, but I have forgotten her words.

Withal, his sense of his lofty superiority to women, his reluctance to attempt in any way to stir up in them what he considered would be puerile, infantile glimmerings of thought, led him into a well-guarded courtesy toward them which flattered most of them. He made no effort to understand them. Feminine mental gyrations, he seemed to think, were not worth his mettle; he had men to fight.

Sometimes I have wondered if perhaps when he was studying so diligently during his twenties and about the time he was starting out on his newspaper career, he did not absorb too much of Plato's *Republic*. It has rather pleased me to account thus for some of his furious rebellion against the world in which he found himself living, and to imagine the in-

fluence of that book behind his eternal cry for an immaculate civilization. He always seemed Roman to me, not only in his military carriage, but in his outlook upon everything, even women.

Mother, though, to return to her, filled the needs of his hours of relaxation. It never occurred to her to study with him; she was too sweet and pretty. It was well, perhaps, for he would not have known what to do if she had intruded upon his studies. He only wanted her to see that the cook made him some coffee before she went to bed and left it where it would still be hot when he came out of his library any time before dawn, looking for it.

He wanted her also to keep the house and the babies clean. He could forgive us anything but a dirty face. I would rather have stood before him after telling a great whopper (Heaven knows, he tried hard enough to make us truthful!) than with the evidence of a hoop-rolling expedition around the block still upon my hands.

There was a big scene when he found the Dane's letter and after that he packed his things 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.

Some years later, when we realized he was never going to forgive her, I begged her to get a divorce and marry that man or some other one—both my brothers were dead now and she was so pathetic in her loneliness—but she only shook her head sadly and told me she could not love anyone but my father. The Dane lived to be an old man but did not marry. He and I corresponded through all the years and until long after Mother's death.

It was the same story with my father. I was living with him in Washington in the 90's when he was working for Mr. Hearst's papers, and one day I asked him why he did not marry again. I knew he walked up and down the streets after dark, looking longingly at the lighted windows of the houses, especially those where he heard the voices of children.

Someone previous to this had whispered to Mother that he wanted a divorce so he might be free to remarry and she, the dutiful, proud wife, immediately got one. But he had not married and I could see no signs that he was interested in any one, so I asked him. He looked at me solemnly and then answered quietly, "Bibs, there is only one woman I have ever loved and that woman is your mother!" Then he walked off and left me. The subject was closed and I did not bring it up again.

I was his hostess in those days and we did a great deal of entertaining. He was a good host and his friends were as staunch and true as his enemies. Somewhere, somehow he had learned to cook and had several *récipés* he had invented; he wrote them out for his friends and some of them were well-known in Washington.

His chafing-dish suppers, especially his Welsh-rarebit suppers, were famous, and as he naturally did not wake up until about midnight, they were given after the theatre or some other party. If he had no copy to get out at once his guests might not leave before dawn. He drank a great deal, but the tales of his drunkenness were exaggerations. I never saw him drunk. He was too fastidious for anything so uncouth as that.

If he had any romances during this time or at any time after he left my mother, I did not know of them. There is an artist

in San Francisco who tells me he spent years on his knees in her studio—perhaps so, I do not know. But I do know that a score of women proposed to him. Some of them were wealthy and apparently thought he would be unable to resist, but he seems to have managed to do so.

His enemies circulated the story that he was having an affair with his secretary, but I knew that dear woman—we all lived in the same house together for years in Washington—and I knew there was no romance there—at least not on his part. She was an extremely plain little person whom he had taken from a dull small town in California, educated, and made his secretary. Naturally enough, she took him for one of the gods. She devoted her life to him, and both Mother and I thought a great deal of her. She was the soul of honor. After his disappearance in Mexico, she took care of his papers and although she soon sent everything on to me to the Middle West, where I was then living, she never gave up hope for his return.

The following poem I found among his papers and it has not been published before. It is written in his beautiful upright handwriting on a piece of letter-paper and it is signed.

How blind is he who, powerless to discern
The glories that about his pathway burn,
Walks unaware the avenues of Dream
Nor sees the domes of Paradise agleam!
O Golden Age, to him more nobly planned
Thy light lies ever upon sea and land
From sordid scenes he lifts his eyes at will
And sees a Grecian god on every hill.

III

When Father was planning his Mexican trip in 1913 we had some long talks about it; about what he thought of the Mexicans

as fighters; about what kind of man Villa really was; about Mexican silver (he was always interested in that subject, for he owned and had worked a California silver mine); and about what he would do when he came back. He was seventy then, but he had never felt better except for feeling tired and in need of a change. His asthma, from which he had suffered most of his life, was giving him a respite at last. He hated the thought of oncoming age—I knew that as all his friends knew it—but I know he intended coming home again. His enemies say he never expected to come back and probably even committed suicide. I am positive that this was not the case. He believed, to be sure, that every man had a sovereign right to do as he pleased in that matter, but he would not have done it—he played the game too well.

On the last evening before he left we talked of a manuscript he was finishing. It was the biography of a fellow newspaper man. He explained that it was almost done and that he intended putting the last touches to it in San Antonio before he went over into Juarez, where Villa was camping with his forces. He outlined it briefly to me and was enthusiastic over it, saying that it was something different in biographies and would make a stir.

He wrote me then from San Antonio and Larado and said his manuscript was finished and that he was leaving at once to see what the Mexicans were scrapping over, and he was going to write his impressions of the row for the press. He said I would hear from him as regularly as he could get letters out of the country. He asked me not to be anxious about him.

From Juarez came another line shortly after he had crossed the border. In that last letter he told me about a trunk, with the manuscript in it, that he had left at

a hotel in Larado to await his return. He mentioned some fighting that he had witnessed and described the Mexicans as the worst shots in the world. He was never heard of again. Shortly after that his trunk disappeared, too, and was never heard of again.

Thousands of reports concerning his end have come to me, but the one I believe is that of Villa shooting Father himself because he was leaving the Villa camp for the Carranza camp to see how things were going on the other side. The bandit feared he might talk; also rumors had floated in of a belt filled with gold that this gringo was wearing. Fear of talk—love of gold—it was so simple for Señor Villa.

It is twenty years now since Father's last letter came from Juarez, but I am still receiving mail from all over the world

from people who say they know the true story of his death. Some of these are from excited mediums whose information is communicated from the spirit world, and I have also received others from persons who say they could be persuaded to give me the real facts for the trifle of \$5000.

Secret Service investigations, Army inquiries, Pinkerton searches, and others carried on by the newspapers were all as thorough as could be, but they yielded nothing. I searched myself for two years, until I was confident that Father had left this world and gone the way he wanted to go. Soldiering in the Civil War, he had seen many shattered bodies, and could never rid himself of the horror of them. When his hour struck he wanted to go quickly and with none of his friends near to look upon his face afterward. That was given him.