

AMBROSE BIERCE AND HIS FIRST LOVE

AN IDYLL OF THE CIVIL WAR

by Carey McWilliams

THE COMPLETE bibliography, one is assured, exists only in the imagination of the novice. Some slight experience as a biographer has convinced me that biographical finality is still more of an illusion. One searches contemporary newspaper files, consults exhaustive lists of authorities, interviews innumerable relatives and "close personal friends"; and, with an elation soon proved deceptive, concludes that the last contradiction has been solved and the final uncertainty removed. Born of this confident mood, a biography is presented to the world. Innocent critics and reviewers pronounce it "definitive", and the biographer gloats with satisfaction. But like proverbial bad pennies slight discrepancies are revealed, new facts are discovered, and fresh anecdotes are recalled. Soon the magnificent structure so patiently erected has been riddled with loopholes. The biography is soon proved to be merely a preliminary essay and the biographer tastes the lees of incompleteness and fragmentariness. And so, I suppose, it has always been.

While working on *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*, I caught an echo of a boyhood love-affair that defied verification. It was not reported to me exactly as a love-affair; in fact, my informant knew nothing of the matter at first hand. She could contribute merely a name and a phrase. The name was "Fatima" which, with the phrase, I managed to

dovetail into my narrative. At the time, I had no definite reason to believe that Fatima ever existed. Although the search for Fatima proved to be unavailing, I did not forget the incident nor the name.

Two years passed and then by a happy circumstance I discovered Fatima. For the benefit of my successor who will of course write the "definitive" life of Ambrose Bierce, I bequeath this record. In view of the fact that the hero of this idyllic affair was "Bitter" Bierce, the bad man of American letters, the incident has an importance which it would otherwise lack. Admirers of Bierce will doubtless deplore this account of the affair, particularly the quotation of the poems that celebrated its rise and fall. But the sentimentality of the idyll is not distasteful, nor, for that matter, merely amusing. It would be rather disappointing to discover in a yellowing envelope bearing the postmark "1864" a love-letter in the modern manner. The sentiment, like the quaint proportions of an ancient print, attests its historic veracity. It belongs to the place and period—Warsaw, Indiana, in 1861—and the characters are Fatima Wright and Ambrose Bierce, whose portraits accompany this piece. For the incident as recorded, I am deeply indebted to Mrs. E. W. Langdon and Mrs. Bird Funk Nicolaus, and, lastly, to Fatima who is known to her neighbours nowadays as Mrs. W. J. Fleming.

Some years prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, Marcus Aurelius Bierce, veteran of the War of the Revolution, lived with his family of nine children on a farm near Warsaw, Indiana. All of these children had been given fantastic names commencing with the letter "A". Ambrose Gwinett, however, was known to his schoolmates as "Brady". He walked from his father's farm to the high school in Warsaw, wearing rather uncouth "heavy half shoes" and "blue woollen home-knit socks". During the winter months, the school maintained a stove at one end of the room behind which was a long bench constructed for the benefit of those who had travelled from a distance. One of Bierce's classmates was Fatima Wright, known to her friends variously as "Time, Tima, and Fatima. Her father was the proprietor of Wright's House, a local hostelry. Fatima does not remember much about her classmate. She does recall sitting by his side on the improvised warming bench during the winter season. Bierce was not regarded as a bright student, nor did he associate with those who had that reputation. Some of the students wrote compositions and verses, but Bierce did not. None of his classmates knew that he was interested in writing, if indeed he was at that time, although Fatima does recall an epitaph that he wrote for a child:

She tasted of life's bitter cup—
Refused to drink her portion up
But turned her little head aside
Disgusted with the taste and died.

After graduation from high school, Brady Bierce worked at odd jobs in Warsaw until the outbreak of the Civil War. Although under age, he enlisted in the first company of volunteers. In the midst of the excitement occasioned by the departure of Company C, Ninth Indiana Infantry for the war, a messenger delivered a mysterious envelope to



AMBROSE BIERCE

Just after enlisting in the Civil War

Fatima. It contained, much to her astonishment, a poem from an anonymous admirer. She still has the poem. It is, so far as I know, the earliest poetic composition of the foremost satirist America has produced, and I quote it in full:

Fatima, should an angel come for heaven,
Bright with celestial ardor from above,
And say no sin of mine should be forgiven,
Till I should cease to sigh for thy dear love,—
Though I'd acknowledge just was the decree,
(For how can I love God adoring thee),
I'd proudly point him back to heaven, and say
"Give me her love,—wash not my sins away,—
But double them upon my head, and bid me go
When life is ended to the realms below."
Thy love, dear girl, is worth eternal woe.
And wouldst thou know whose heart thus yearns
for thee
And if thou knew couldst deign to pardon me
Two moments sweet I've been in paradise
Thy lips have twice met mine and only twice.

The identification was, unfortunately, ambiguous: Fatima could not recall who it was that she had kissed but twice.

Oliver Wright, a brother, had also enlisted in the Ninth Indiana. From time to time, he wrote to his family about the activities of the company in West Virginia. In one letter he mentioned that Brady Biercé had been made a lieutenant for conspicuous bravery in rescuing a comrade while under heavy fire



FATIMA WRIGHT

Taken at Warsaw, Indiana, about 1864

from the enemy. If Brady ever returned to Warsaw, Fatima and Clara, another sister, must entertain him royally. Later during the war, Biercé received a severe scalp wound and returned to Warsaw on furlough. Oliver Wright's admonition to his sisters was doubtless superfluous: Biercé was young, wounded, and a hero. He no longer concealed his admiration for Fatima. When she told him of the mysterious poem, he said: "If you knew the man that wrote the poem would you love him?" To quote Fatima: "I said certainly I

would love him; how could I help but love any one who loved me so much?" Needless to say, the authorship of the poem was confessed.

During this pleasant furlough, Biercé and his fiancée (for they became engaged) were together constantly, chaperoned with all the formality of the period by Clara Wright. The young lieutenant was very dignified. He was so dignified, in fact, that it was a great pleasure to tease him. On one occasion he drove to the Wrights' home in a rig drawn by a handsome team to take the sisters riding. Fatima had "a very fine hat with a long tissue veil tied over it". She took the veil and tied it over her father's huge wide-brimmed straw hat and minced down the walk to the carriage accompanied by her chaperon. Biercé was furious. He jerked the fancy veil from the ugly straw chapeau and ordered the ladies back to the house. When they again emerged, an elegant bonnet had been substituted for the offending straw hat and they drove away "in a peaceful and jolly manner".

The scalp wound was troublesome, however, and Biercé must have damned the hours that he had to remain in his father's home. By that time his father had moved into Warsaw. A little girl from the neighbouring Piper family ran away nearly every day to steal into the library of the Biercé home and idolize the young hero who reclined on his father's couch covered with a handsome military cape. He teased the young girl so unmercifully that she was glad to escape. The wound occasioned apologies and broken engagements. Clara Wright has fortunately saved a note, sent on one such occasion, that is particularly valuable for the date which it bears:

Warsaw, Jan. 27—'64.

Miss Clara—

I am sorry to state that I fear I shall be compelled to forego the pleasure I anticipated in

accompanying you and Tima to the concert this evening.

Upon rising this morning I was attacked with giddiness followed by a severe headache which has increased ever since, until I am really very ill.

I write that you may make other engagements in time for the concert; though if my illness subsides I shall be most happy to attend if you are still unengaged.

I am very sorry and assure you that nothing short of positive sickness would prevent my claiming the honor you so kindly intended me.

Sincerely your friend,

A. G. Bierce.

Please give my kindest regards to Tima.

A. G. B.

Nearly every afternoon, the sisters, accompanied by Bierce, walked to an empty cabin on the edge of the woods that came to the outskirts of Warsaw. They took books with them and Bierce read aloud, while the devoted Fatima wove a garland of wild rose buds. (*Shades of The Devil's Dictionary and The Fiend's Delight!*) Most of the correspondence which passed between Bierce and his fiancée, including numerous lyrics, has been destroyed. After the romantic couple had quarreled, Fatima destroyed all of the letters that she had received. But she did save, in addition to the poem that I have quoted, an acrostic that Bierce left with her when he rejoined his command:

Fate—whose edict oft hath wrung
 Anguish—drops from hearts unstrung—
 Tears of hopeless prayerless pain—
 I now defy thee. Free again,
 My soul though darkened still by thee,
 And 'bittered still, spurns thy decree.

While *she* loves me, sheathe thy dart;
 Rob me of that love—and bury
 In this burning passion-heart—
 Gloomy cell of misery—
 Heated toy of woman's art—
 Thy fearful 'shaft—Insanity.

And the author of these lines was the man who, in his column of "Prattle" in the *San Francisco Examiner*, terrorized a generation of "minor" poets on the Pacific Coast!

The days seemed interminable when Bierce returned to the army. He seems to have been tormented (the usual fate of the soldier) by thoughts of his sweetheart being wooed by civilians and soldiers home on furlough. Not receiving letters as frequently as he desired and being somewhat exasperated by the restrictions that kept him from Warsaw, Bierce resorted to the traditional expedient; *i. e.* he wrote to the chaperon. The letter, which is now in Mrs. Fleming's possession, is the only letter in existence written by Bierce while in the service. For this reason, I quote it in full:

Hd. Qrs. 2nd Brig. 3d Div. 4th A. C.

Ackworth, Ga., June 8th, 1864.

My Dear Clara:

Will you be very much displeased to hear from me by letter?

If I thought so I would never touch pen again. 'Tis true you never asked me to write to you, but the knowledge that I still live cannot be unwelcome to one who professes to regard me as a *friend*. I don't know Clara what the word *friend* means to you who have so many, but to *me* friendship has a meaning deeper than the definition of Webster or Worcester. And my friendship for you is a feeling which no language can define. Do you call this flattery? If so you do not know me and I forgive you.

I have not written to you before, but my neglect was not caused by indifference. I knew Tima would sometimes mention my name to you. But I want to hear from you very much; not because you will tell me of Tima, but of yourself. You always seemed to think, Clara, that I never cared for you except as Tima's sister—a sort of necessary evil. (*Vide*—our carriage ride by Eagle lake.) Is it necessary for me to say you were unjust to me? No, Clara, except our sweet Tima, I love you better than any one on this earth.

Perhaps this is not right;—perhaps my mother and sister should be first in my affections,—but so it is.

I am getting very tired of my present life and weary of the profession of arms. Not because of its horrors or dangers; not because its hardships affect me, but because I wish to be with you and my darling. The pleasant weeks with you, so like a dream, have nearly spoiled the soldier to make the—pensive individual.

Ask Tima why I get no more letters from her. Have I offended her? I may have written something as heartless and cruel as I used to say to her. If I have I hope she will forgive me. Her last letter was dated May 11th.

Do you think that there is a probability of my letters getting into other hands than hers? Please tell me for the thought troubles me very much. Oh, if I could be with you both again my measure of happiness would be full. I do not see how I could have been so unhappy as I sometimes was when with you.

But I ought rather to be thankful for being allowed so much happiness with you—so much more than I deserved—than to repine at the fate which withholds more. I hardly expect ever to see you again, and perhaps it is better so. Every day some one is struck down who is so much better than I. Since leaving Cleveland Tenn. my brigade has lost nearly one third its numbers killed and wounded.

Among these were so many good men who could ill be spared from the army and the world. And yet I am left. But my turn will come in time. Oh, how pleasant would death be were it for you and Tima, instead of for my country—for a cause which may be right and may be wrong. Do you think I lack patriotism for talking this way? Perhaps so. Soldiers are not troubled with that sort of stuff.

May I talk to you about D——? Do you love him yet? or think you do?

Is that a blunt question? You know you told me you did once. Please answer it.

Oh, I wish I could help you. You who have been so good to me. But my hands are tied. I can only warn you. There is a metal among the rocks here which viewed at a distance has all the appearances of gold. A close inspection shows it to be the basest dross. You are an admirer of pebbles I believe.

Do tell me all about yourself and Tima. What books you read, what society you have, and if you have lots of fun. Capt. Webster desired to

be remembered to you and Tima if I ever wrote you. By the way is Jo Williams at W.? The less you have to do with him the better you will please me. If you require reasons I will give them. Do you know my mother yet, and does Tima call on her as she promised me? How is Lyde C.?

Now Clare if you don't write to me at once I shall take it as proof that you don't wish to hear from me again.

Give my kindest regards to 'Slissa and the girls.

Take my darling in your arms, and kiss her a thousand times for me.

With more love than I can tell, I am

Your friend

A. G. BIERCE

P.S. Do you hear from Ol? I can get no word from him.*

B——

It is raining very hard and I am very lonely. In looking over my valise just now I found tucked away snugly a little embroidered handkerchief. Do you remember it? Then there were also some little pebbles; common looking things enough, but each one is transparent, and looking into it I see two tiny figures with skirts just *slightly* elevated, showing such delicate little—feet, stepping along the soft sand, and picking up these little nothings for me. What delicate little tracks they leave behind them. But these tracks will all be erased by the next rain. Not so the impressions left on the hard and stony soil of my heart. Every examination shows me how some mischievous persons have crept into the garden of my soul, and tracked it up worse than a melon patch by school-boys.

But not one of the little tracks shall be blotted out by the rude gardener [sic] Time. The amount of it all is, Clare, that I love you and Tima so I can't find language to tell it.

I just wish I could pass my whole life with you both, and have nothing to do but give myself up to the delicious intoxication of your society. For that, I would renounce the whole world and all the ties of kindred; throw away every ambition or aim in life, and make a fool of myself in the most approved style generally.

BRADY.

* Oliver Wright.

The letter was written with obvious care; it contains no interlineations or corrections. The handwriting is unmistakable: time did not change it by so much as a stroke or an added shading. While excessively romantic (one must remember that the soldier was young, that he was miles from home, and that the hour was late), the tone of the letter is characteristic. The explicit and forthright direction ("If you require reasons I will give them"), and the redeeming lightness of the last lines, are qualities that distinguish nearly every Bierce letter that I have examined. At the time the letter was written, Bierce had been in the army over three years—since April 19th, 1861. He had fought at Shiloh, Chickamauga, and Franklin. Slight wonder that he was "getting very tired of the profession of arms" for a "cause which might be right or might be wrong". His meditations fifty-four years later merely echoed this same dubiety.

As is well known, Bierce went to the Pacific Coast at the end of the war. Contrary to the previously accepted facts, however, it now seems that he returned from California to New York on his way back to Warsaw. In New York he received word that Fatima had married. He would not credit the report until it had been confirmed by his brother, Albert Bierce. He then returned to California, where he remained until leaving for London. In later years, Albert Bierce called upon Fatima and delivered to her a sheaf of letters and a clipping from *Figaro*, an early San Francisco weekly. On the margin of the clipping the faded pencil notation "Brady" appears:

NOT QUITE FORGOTTEN

Not quite forgotten, though the years endeavor
To fling a veil between thy soul and mine;
Deep in my heart thy memory livest ever;
By tears and smiles unalter'd is thy shrine.

Not quite forgotten, oh! thou first and fairest
Of all my day-dreams! thou who yet must be
Trusted in longing and still loved the dearest.
Forgotten? There is no such word for thee!

Not quite forgotten, for thy dear reflection
Undimm'd in memory ever must remain;
And there are times when all the old affection
Which I have borne thee surges back again.

No, not forgotten! for a chance resemblance
A voice which rings as thine hath rung of old,
Will often bring thee back to my remembrance,
And reproduce the past a thousand fold.

Faint as the fragrance of a flower long gather'd,
Such is the love I bear thee; and no sin
I count it, for its passion long since wither'd;
And now 'tis love naught of earth therein.

Can it have been a terrifying recollection of this lyric that made Bierce such a relentless foe of the biographer? In his savage attack on the local poets of San Francisco, could he have been moved by some ghostly refrain from his own lyrics to Fatima? The few lines that I have quoted would have brought a princely sum if auctioned to his enemies in San Francisco during the decades in which they writhed under his satire. I think it quite likely that his hatred of romantic and sentimental poets may be traced to the revulsion which he must have experienced in later years toward this idyllic affair and the poems and letters in which it was commemorated.