

Ambrose Bierce's Word Etchings of War

By EDWARD N. TEALL.

AMBROSE BIERCE and O. Henry are pen brothers. A highly distinguished lady story writer created something of a sensation among the Philistines by raking Mr. Porter's literary reputation over the coals of criticism and burning away everything but an accusation of having written what America is proud to have had him write for it—short stories. If an O. Henry or Ambrose Bierce novel might be shown up as an expanded and glorified short story, what shall we say of the pretentious novels that have less than half the matter, power and effect of one of the brilliant bits of fiction that leaped from those two fire tipped pens?

The discussion is fruitless until it is agreed that not all O. Henry stories, not all Ambrose Bierce stories, are true O. Henry, true A. Bierce. We have to test, reject, select. O. Henry has been collected in "popular" form, and now we have Bierce made accessible to the multitude in his completeness. We hope, for the gratification of a not illegitimate curiosity, to live to see the time when these two authors shall have passed the stage of selection, guided by particular and narrow minor interests, and when the final sifting of their works on broad and permanent considerations shall have been erected by time—and the change that brings forth, or fails to bring forth, a publisher acute enough to embody accurately the popular verdict.

A Publisher's Enterprise.

The first volume of *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce* in a make-up and at a price that will suit the "average" or "general" reader comes from the young, ambitious and cleverly guided house of Boni & Liveright. It is called *In the Midst of Life (Tales of Soldiers and Civilians)*. It would not have been quite so interesting to get this collection from one of the longer established firms. It adds a flavor to the enterprise to complement the savor of the authorship. And it is certainly a fine acquisition for the Boni & Liveright "list"!

In this present volume the war stories occupy three-fifths of the space. They are civil war stories. It is surprising—or perhaps it isn't; at any rate, it is worthy of note—how the output of civil war matter continues and how interest in it persists. Even the world war in defence of civilization seems to have stimulated rather than checked it.

Without pretending to have gone deeply into the matter, we may note two books, issued since the great war began, which seem to have been successful: Rossiter Johnson's *The Fight for the Republic* (G. P. Putnam's Sons) and *One Young Soldier*, by Ira Seymour Dodd (Dodd, Mead & Company). Of these books, one is a history with a new "angle," the other a reprint of a collection first published as *The Song of the Rappahannock*, consisting of stories and sketches embodying the experience and observation of a participant in Federal operations in the field. There have been others, but these are at the easy surface of recollection, and are sufficient for the present purpose. They help to confirm the publisher's judgment in putting out just this part of Bierce's writings at just this time.

Bierce the Unsparring.

Coming fresh from the stories, however, one inclines to doubt the wisdom of this course. Not at all, let it be most distinctly understood, the wisdom, the necessity even, of the project as a whole! But Bierce spared no one's feelings.

The war in his stories is the real thing. No detail is skipped because it is ghastly. You even have to examine the pages carefully before you can be quite sure that he does not seek them out, and discard others, equally true in the picture, in order to include more and more of the horrors. But in the end you are sure, quite sure. He is not picturing war as a social phenomenon; he is reflecting the individual participant's reactions.

A man is being hanged. He escapes; he moves in a world of terror. But—he did not escape; he was hanged, he died in the noose. The whole detailed report of his adventures is only a report of his mind's wanderings in the passage out of life. Incidentally, the revelation of this truth, in the last sentence of the story, is insurmountable evidence of the writer's

kinship with O. Henry. It is the "surprise" sentence, swift, terrible and utterly "final."

Swine scouring a deserted battlefield mutilate not only the dead but the dying. Bierce tells you it in a phrase that, in its literal truthfulness, bites into your mind like etchers' acid. A man is imprisoned in the wreck of a shot down hut immovably—and with the muzzle of his rifle, fixed firm in the wreckage, aiming straight between his eyes. He lasts just twenty-two minutes; and at the end of that time a passerby, looking at his face amid the ruins, says: "Dead a week!"

Three words worth 300, as words commonly run.

The fact that the rifle was empty, when the man believed it loaded and certain to be discharged by some jarring of the wreckage—or by the rats that overran the ruins!—and that the man who discovered the victim—but not his identity!—was the victim's brother do this one thing in a literary way, whatever else may be seen in them: they make Bierce one with Poe.

Military law makes a man cause the death of his father, fighting on the other side. It makes another man fire the gun that kills his wife and child in a house—his own house—about which the enemy is making a stand. In the one instance the man has to aim the shot deliberately, knowing just what its result means to him. In the other he fires blindly, not certain what the shot will do to him.

In each instance the outcome is horrible. In the first the horror was inevita-

ble. It was doom. In the second it might have been spared. Perhaps it would have been more artistic to spare it.

Both the tragedies are war; not war merely, but *civil* war. Can any tragedies of individual soldiers, thus barely told, check the making of war, and of civil war, by those who direct the fates of peoples? There are rich possibilities in that theme of speculation.

Skill and Common Clay.

Even the admirers of Bierce's stories must admit that there is not always a display of quality in the adoption of a proposition for them. A captured spy, expecting to be shot to-morrow, and philosophizing and jesting about death, proves coward when ordered to immediate execution, while another man, who has professed fear of death, meets it, coming unannounced, in the manner of a truly brave man. The proposition is commonplace; the demonstration at the hands of a man like Ambrose Bierce is impressive—possibly beyond the measure of its real merit.

The stories do not all stand the test. The officer who assigns to a post of danger the man whose wife he has seduced does but copy King David. But consider this outline: A Union soldier guarding a captured Confederate spy sleeps, and the Confederate instead of escaping saves the Union soldier's life by waking him when the guard makes its rounds. He does escape, however, later; and, captured once more, falls into the hands of the man he saved. The

Union man is torn between the promptings of gratitude and the call of duty. He orders the spy to his death and kills himself. In lesser hands than Bierce's the act might fail of complete justification. Bierce justifies it as the payment of a debt.

These things and those that go with them bulk into—what? It must be something good to justify its presentation now, when we are at war. Probably a true philosopher would refuse to acknowledge any need of considering in the case the "feelings" of individuals. It would be easy to write columns about it, but the whole matter seems best summed up in one of the brilliant, illuminating phrases that enrich these splendid pages! The war stories echo "the murmur of the centuries breaking upon the shore of eternity."

The second half of the book, *Tales of Civilians*, contains eleven titles—they are sketches rather than stories: *The Man Out of the Nose, An Adventure at Brownville, The Famous Gilson Bequest, The Applicant, A Watcher of the Dead, The Man and the Snake, A Holy Terror, The Suitable Surroundings, The Boarded Window, A Lady From Redhorse, The Eyes of the Panther.*

Bierce, like O. Henry—and like Poe—is about as negligible in American literature as De Maupassant is in French literature.

IN THE MIDST OF LIFE (TALES OF SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS). BY AMBROSE BIERCE. Boni & Liveright. \$1.50.

"The Evergreen Tree."

THE genuine talent of Percy MacKaye was for some years devoted to experiments in dramatic form. Of these the best by all odds was *The Scarecrow*, a play that under proper conditions and with an audience slightly more sophisticated than is usually found in this country might have enjoyed a popular success. But Mr. MacKaye is in no sense a man of the theatre. His chief interest in it is rather sociological than dramatic: his books on community drama and his masques, in which whole cities have participated, are what will count in the history of the American theatre and not his plays.

Percy MacKaye is at his best in the masque. His *Saint Louis* marked a decided advance in civic development; it was at the same time a work of art.

The Evergreen Tree is a Christmas masque. The poet calls it *A Masque of Christmas Time for Community Singing and Acting*. The volume now published contains a brief preface by Mr. MacKaye, scenic and costume designs by Robert E. Jones, and three monographs on the masque, by the author, the scene designer, and Arthur Farwell, the composer of the music. The illustrations, in color and in black and white, are beautiful in themselves and will prove invaluable, of course, to the prospective producer. An appendix includes suggestions for the community prologue and epilogue, a ground plan for the action, and helpful hints on practically every problem which the stage manager is called upon to solve.

As one reads this masque one cannot but feel that Percy MacKaye has found himself, and realize that if he would effect a change in our national life, a closer community of life and thought in our cities, towns and villages, he must keep clear of the commercial stage—which will do very well without him—and devote himself to such works as *The Evergreen Tree*.

THE EVERGREEN TREE. BY PERCY MACKAYE. D. Appleton & Co. \$2.

"The Story of the Scots Stage"

THERE is so little available material on the Scottish stage and drama that curiosity is at once stimulated by a *Story of the Scots Stage*. Mr. Robb Lawson has written an entertaining history, covering the ground from the very beginnings, starting with the bards and minstrels. He then follows the currents of religious fanaticism, always at swords points with the theatre, and later develops his subject in individual cities—Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee, Arbroath and Perth. While there is a wealth of anecdote, and while the author spares no pains to make the book readable, he is,

so far as any but a specialist in Scottish records can judge, an authoritative guide.

Every country had its palmy days, and every country, likewise, has its store of theatrical anecdotes. The following is characteristic of the Glasgow palmy days. The old actor, J. H. Alexander, was playing Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, "when a gentleman in the boxes commenced to titter at him. The manager paused and glared at the auditor, but ineffectively.

"Then Cassius stepped forward: 'I must request the gentleman to pay more attention to good manners and to the feelings of the audience. I can't have the entertainment spoiled by the disgraceful conduct of a puppy. For myself, I consider I am quite competent to play the part I am engaged in, and if that fellow in the boxes continues his annoyance, I shall feel myself compelled to personally turn him out.'

"The play was then continued, but not for long. Again the laughter began, and Pannier, who played Brutus, got over the footlights, climbed into the box, and turned the offender out."

A book, then, for lovers of palmy days—which must have been the same the world over—as well as for the student.

THE STORY OF THE SCOTS STAGE. BY BARRETT H. CLARK. E. P. Dutton & Co. \$2.

"Artists' Families"

AFTER hibernating beyond the usual time by several months the Drama League Series of Plays has again crept forth into the light with Brioux's comedy, *Ménages d'artistes*, translated by Barrett H. Clark as *Artists' Families*. If the series is ever going to exert the influence which it ought to exert the editors should be wise enough to learn that the books had better appear regularly, and often enough to remind readers of plays that the series is still a living organism.

However, here is a new volume which would be welcome if for no other reason than that it shows us an entirely different aspect of the much talked of author of *Damaged Goods*. There were some people who still believed that Brioux was a dramatist and not merely a stodgy old preacher; that he could write a real play and not merely dull sermons. *Artists' Families* is an early work, of course, and the hand of the master is not clearly visible, but it is a splendid satire on the artistic temperament.

Artists' Families stands together with *Blanchette* and *Le Bourgeois aux champs*—his latest play—as the expression of what Brioux might have done had he cared a little less about institutions and ideas, and a little more about life and human beings. It is strange that this whole hearted, sympathetic, easily moved Frenchman should have devoted his very real talent to the task of exposing social wrongs in general, instead of trying to get under the skin of his puppets and to

give the world more human beings and fewer abstract ideas.

Artists' Families, with its distinct indications of what its author might easily have done, leaves one with a sense of regret, for despite its occasional crudeness there is power, character analysis and rude humor throughout of a high order.

ARTISTS' FAMILIES. Comedy in three acts. BY EUGENE BRIEUX. Translated by Barrett H. Clark. Doubleday, Page & Co. 75 cents.

'How's Your Second Act?'

HOW'S YOUR SECOND ACT? by Arthur Hopkins, is the only genuinely enlightening contribution to the theory of drama production, written by a manager that has fallen into our hands of recent years.

This little volume, with its misleading title, is rendered top heavy, so to speak, by George Jean Nathan's thirteen page foreword. Mr. Nathan says very little about Mr. Hopkins's important but by no means new theory of unconscious projection, but he is diabolically pertinent—as usual—in what he says of the theatrical situation in these United States.

Hopkins's chief contention is for a sincere and simple dramaturgy, with sincere and simple actors, management, settings and—critics. His theory he very wisely bases on his own experience as a manager, and the manager who produced *A Successful Calamity* is surely entitled to respectful attention.

His theory is briefly this: "Complete illusion has to do entirely with the unconscious mind. Except in the case of certain intellectual plays the theatre is wholly concerned with the unconscious mind of the audience. The conscious mind should play no part." This leads Mr. Hopkins to an unqualified rejection of realism, as "Realistic settings are designed wholly for conscious appeal." The auditor's attention is absorbed by non-essential details; there is no scope for the imagination . . . a theatre without imagination becomes a building in which people put paint on their faces and do tricks, and no trick they perform is worth looking at unless they take a reasonable chance of being killed in the attempt."

Very obvious, yes, and very true, but unfortunately the old theatre with its shopworn traditions is still with us, and it is well for a man who is doing his best to kill it to tell us how it may be done.

Mr. Hopkins's literary ambitions are doubtless not so important as his dramatic; his English is terse and clear, but he ought to be a little more careful next time; "pretty much common" sounds more like a statement from the Shubert office than a phrase from the book of a cultured man.

HOW'S YOUR SECOND ACT? BY ARTHUR HOPKINS. Philip Goodman Company. 90 cents.