

# **AMBROSE AND GERTRUDE**

A One Act Play

by Don Swaim



## **ABOUT**

The California novelist Gertrude Atherton was a liberated woman in the years before women's equality. In 1891, she challenged the misogynistic literary genius Ambrose Bierce during a fateful real-life confrontation during which the two clashed on everything from dogs to religion to writing. A provocation he could not win.

## **CAST**

### **Gertrude Atherton**

Handsome woman in her early thirties, carrying a parasol and small travel kit. Hair blond, swept high on her head. A single strand of pearls at her neck, and she wears a blue dress and shoes with pointed toes.

### **Ambrose Bierce**

Tall, distinguished man in his late forties. Bierce wears his usual black suit, a man of striking good looks with a bristling mustache, beetling brows, and beautiful hands. Bierce has a mysterious quality about him, which interests her.

## **SETTING, TIME**

Sunol Glen, a small California resort community, near San Francisco, 1891

### Scene I

Railroad platform and bench

### Scene II

Hotel porch rocking chairs

### Scene III

Hotel dining room table

### Scene IV

Bierce's hotel room

### Scene V

Pigsty next to railroad platform

## SCENE I

*(Train WHISTLES then HISSES as it stops. Atherton steps from the train to the platform, where Bierce greets her.)*

AMBROSE

You must be Mrs. Atherton.

GERTRUDE

And you are Mr. Bierce.

AMBROSE

You're older than I thought. But attractive.

GERTRUDE

It's indelicate of you to comment on a woman's age. I'm thirty-four. How old are you?

AMBROSE

I stand chastised. I'm forty-nine.

GERTRUDE

Hmmmm. Older than I thought. But attractive. You remind me of my father.

AMBROSE

*(Harrumphs)*

So we meet at last, after our voluminous exchanges of letters.

GERTRUDE

I never miss your column in the *Examiner*, and I appreciate the many kind words you've said about my writing.

AMBROSE

Why don't we rest here awhile and watch the trains before going on to my hotel?

*(They sit on a bench on the station platform.)*

GERTRUDE

I read about the death of your son, and I'm deeply sorry for your loss.

AMBROSE

I'm touched by the sentiment, my dear. To lose a child, just seventeen, to suicide as part of a murderous love triangle was deeply shocking, and I'm only now beginning to recover from it.

GERTRUDE

I, too, lost a son, although not from such violent circumstances.

AMBROSE

Oh?

GERTRUDE

When he was just six. Of diphtheria.

AMBROSE

I'm sorry for you as well.

GERTRUDE

And I lost a husband. Poor George, for his health, went to sea and died of a hemorrhage after receiving morphine for a kidney stone attack. In Tahiti, they embalmed him in a barrel of rum and shipped him back.

AMBROSE

Rum? I adore the thought.

GERTRUDE

After the ship docked in San Francisco, I refused to look at his body. I'm in horror of corpses. Also, I had to waste money on a widow's attire.

AMBROSE

Death's always difficult. For the living.

GERTRUDE

Actually, I was glad to see the beggar go. Eleven years with George Henry Bowen Atherton served its purpose.

AMBROSE

Which was?

GERTRUDE

To bring two children into the world. One of whom survives. She's thirteen and resides with her grandmother while I expand my skills as an author.

AMBROSE

I have two remaining children, Mrs. Atherton. They live with their mother.

GERTRUDE

What about your wife, Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

I see her no longer, Mrs. Atherton. We've separated. Twenty years with her also served its purpose.

GERTRUDE

*(Giggles)*

AMBROSE

I fear I've been in isolation too long. William Randolph Hearst makes it possible by sending my check to wherever I choose to be. Therefore, I'm pleased to receive guests, especially one so attractive as you. Were all my visitors so comely I'd be a happy man, indeed. I've always believed that when God makes a beautiful woman, the devil opens a new register.

GERTRUDE

*(Looks at him skeptically, obviously displeased at his words.)*

AMBROSE

I've received some distressing news. About my friend Prentice Mulford, the writer.

GERTRUDE

I believe I've among the few who have actually read some of Mr. Mulford's little tales.

AMBROSE

Dead. They found his body in a small boat in Sheepshead Bay, New York, his banjo by his side. No one knows how or when he died.

GERTRUDE

Does it qualify as a mystery?

AMBROSE

It qualifies as a suicide. The fool was crazy in love. He met a little tramp named Josie in London and brought her to America, where he opened a package of cheap cigarettes and saw her picture on it. Stark naked. Josie was posing nude for commercial artists.

GERTRUDE

Which was worse? Josie nude or the tobacco?

AMBROSE

When she left him, he withdrew to a New Jersey swamp to live as a hermit in a boat with nothing but a few rags, a spirit lamp, pen and paper. Turned out five-cent tracts about spiritualism, faith healing, and other tommyrot. Years ago, in San Francisco, when I drunkenly climbed a hill to pull down some wretched Christian cross, Mulford clung to my leg to stop me.

GERTRUDE

Perhaps Mr. Mulford was on to something about the cross that you weren't.

AMBROSE

He wasn't on to anything. There's no difference between mysticism and intellectual suicide.

*(As they stand to continue their walk she stumbles. Bierce keeps her from falling)*

GERTRUDE

I'm so clumsy.

AMBROSE

You simply stumbled.

GERTRUDE

I'm prone to accidents. Once, I drank ammonia thinking it was water and nearly had to have my stomach pumped. I'm a walking calamity.

AMBROSE

Calamities are of two kind, my dear. Misfortune to ourselves, and good fortune to others. I'm certain that you and I together will never realize calamities of any sort.

CURTAIN

## SCENE II

*(Ambrose and Gertrude sit in rocking chairs, a table between them, on the porch of the Sunol Glen Hotel. They sip lemonade to the sound of croquet mallets STRIKING balls on the lawn.)*

GERTRUDE

Mr. Bierce, you never answered the question I wrote you about. Why you dislike dogs so much.

AMBROSE

Once, I was walking through the woods with my daughter when a dog attacked us. The beast snapped at our ankles. I saw an indolent fool leaning against a tree, watching the whole thing, and I shouted at him to call his dog off. When he didn't, I pulled out my gun and shot the animal dead.

GERTRUDE

Mr. Bierce!

AMBROSE

I asked the man why he hadn't called his dog away.

GERTRUDE

What did he say?

AMBROSE

He shrugged and said, 'Ah, shucks, that dog wasn't mine.'

GERTRUDE

*(Laughs)*

I hope you don't make a habit of shooting dogs, Mr. Bierce.

AMBROSE

No more than I do shooting men.

GERTRUDE

Have you ever shot a man?

AMBROSE

*(Wary)*

I think your question's best reserved for our discussion about dogs. My antipathy for the beast's best summarized with some doggerel I wrote.

Snap-dogs, lap-dogs, always-on-tap-dogs,  
Smilers, defilers,  
Reekers and leakers.

GERTRUDE

Quite droll, but it doesn't answer my question.

AMBROSE

The word 'dog' is a term of contempt the world over. Man may love his own dog but not all dogs.

GERTRUDE

Certainly, man loves his—or her—dog. Because the dog returns the love.

AMBROSE

In that the animal, ever cadging when not marauding, tickles man's vanity by fawning upon him as the sole visible source of steaks and bones.

GERTRUDE

That's an exaggeration.

AMBROSE

I never exaggerate. The dog's an encampment of fleas and a reservoir of sinful smells. His loyalty's given to the person, honorable or a blackguard, who feeds him.

GERTRUDE

Have you not known *humans* to be encampments of fleas and reservoirs of sinful smells?

AMBROSE

Irrelevant. The trouble with the modern dog is that he's the same old dog. Not an inch has the rascal evolved. We humans no longer squat on our naked haunches and gnaw raw bones. But this canine childhood companion of our race, this dismal anachronism, this veteran inharmony in the scheme of things, has made no progress at all.

GERTRUDE

Perhaps dogs weren't meant to make progress in human terms. Maybe they were intended to be the companion to our breed.

AMBROSE

Bosh. Nothing in our existence is *intended* to be. To believe that is to believe that some superior being orchestrates life.

GERTRUDE

Which is certainly not unreasonable. Many intelligent people hold that belief.

AMBROSE

I'd hate to deflate your views on religion, my dear. It would be unfair to one as young, naive, and pretty as you.

GERTRUDE

You're condescending. My views about religion are no doubt little different from your own, but I at least carry an open mind.

AMBROSE

It's hopeless speaking to you on this subject. Women love dogs, but, of course, a woman will love anything.

GERTRUDE

That, sir, is an insult.

AMBROSE

Have you ever kissed a dog?

GERTRUDE

Of course I've kissed a dog. Fuzzy, furry, vulnerable creatures.

AMBROSE

Aha. Likely you've kissed more dogs than men. It's my opinion that the female who holds a dog to her heart is without other lodgers, namely those of the human male.

GERTRUDE

Ridiculous. You seem to have as poor an opinion of women as you do of dogs, and I resent it. I didn't take a two-hour train ride all the way to Sunol to be insulted by you.

AMBROSE

If that's the way you feel, you're welcome to take the next train out.

GERTRUDE

Perhaps I shall.

AMBROSE

Excellent.

*(The two sit in angry silence. Again, the CLICK of the croquet balls being STRUCK by mallets. Gertrude irritably brushes at what appears to be a horsefly buzzing her head. Bierce, trying to make amends, shakes the lemonade pitcher, the ice TINKLING).*

AMBROSE

Would you care for some more lemonade, Mrs. Atherton?

GERTRUDE

Not at the moment, Mr. Bierce.

AMBROSE

*(Refills his glass, surreptitiously spikes it from a flask)*

GERTRUDE

See here, sir. I came here to discuss literature with you, not dogs.

AMBROSE

You were the one who raised the subject.

GERTRUDE

And now I'm making an effort to elevate our conversation to higher level. The novel, for instance.

AMBROSE

*(Shakes his head)*

Don't waste your time thinking about the novel.

GERTRUDE

That's precisely what I write. Four of them, with varying results. And because of discrimination against women writers I've had to use a pseudonym.

AMBROSE

Yes, that silly name you employed for your piece in the *Argonaut*. Asmodeus, as I recall.

GERTRUDE

So you remember.

AMBROSE

I still read the *Argonaut* even though I've no use for its owner, Frank Pixley. I once worked as the swine's editor.

GERTRUDE

Mr. Pixley paid me one-hundred-fifty dollars for my novel *The Randolphs of Redwoods*, which he published as a serial.

AMBROSE

And how do you feel about it?

GERTRUDE

Embarrassed.

AMBROSE

Understandably.

GERTRUDE

Admittedly, it was flawed. My next novel was published under the name of Fran Lin. A contraction of my mother's maiden name.

AMBROSE

Were you shamed by it as well? The novel, I mean.

GERTRUDE

Readers bought it. How many writers can say that?

AMBROSE

And I say, so what? Madam, in any one quarter-century there can't be more than half a dozen novels that posterity will take the trouble to read.

GERTRUDE

Hang posterity. I intend to write for now.

AMBROSE

I'm telling you that contemporary novels are only read by reviewers and the multitude. They'll read anything as long as it's long, untrue, new, and written in dialect, which I despise.

GERTRUDE

So we must read only the classics.

AMBROSE

Readers of taste illuminate their minds and warm their hearts in Scott's suffusing glow. The strange, heatless glimmer of Hawthorne fascinates more and more. *The Thousand-and-One Nights* is the captain of tale telling.

GERTRUDE

If we were to listen to you, there'd be no novels written today at all. No challengers to rival Scott and Hawthorne. We'd all be stuck in the past. That's nonsensical.

AMBROSE

*(Sputters)*

You're starting to annoy me, Mrs. Atherton.

GERTRUDE

And you're long past annoying me, Mr. Bierce.

*(Turns away from him)*

AMBROSE

Dammit.

*(Composes and speaks slowly as if educating a mere child)*

Let me try to explain to you that the modern novel is the lowest form of imagination. It's a diluted story filled with trivialities and nonessentials. I've never seen one that couldn't be cut by a half.

GERTRUDE

*(Exasperated)*

The novel allows the writer to develop characters in the way a short story can't. It permits the telling of a story that may take place over many years, generations, with many, many characters.

AMBROSE

No, no, no. The novel bears the same relation to literature that a panorama has to painting. A panorama lacks that basic quality needed in art: unity and totality of effect. As it can't be seen all at once, the panorama's parts must be viewed successively. It's the same with a story too long to be read in a single sitting.

GERTRUDE

Just because *you've* never written one.

AMBROSE

What the deuce?

GERTRUDE

I've read your stories in the *Examiner*. Your Civil War stories, your ghost stories. They may be models of craftsmanship and style but they cry out for development. For amplification.

AMBROSE

You have the temerity to tell me how *my* stories should be written?

GERTRUDE

In fact, your stories have no humanity. They're as cold as ice. And since they don't touch our hearts, your stories will never be remembered.

AMBROSE

I don't write the kind of silly, trite, romantic pap that you do. And don't try to tell me your work will ever be remembered. If, indeed, you find some intelligence, other than mine, to read it.

GERTRUDE

Pap you say? You gave me encouragement. You told me of my potential. I have your letters stating so. And now you call my work pap?

*(Slams her glass on the table)*

AMBROSE

Obviously I was mistaken.

GERTRUDE

You're jealous.

AMBROSE

What the Sam Hill...

GERTRUDE

Yes, jealous. Because *you* can't write novels. And you know I can. And will. Any clever, cultivated mind with a modicum of talent, such as yourself...

AMBROSE

Modicum?

GERTRUDE

...can manage a short story. But it takes a special person with an exceptional endowment to master the novel. You don't have it, Mr. Bierce. All you can do is to criticize and to write bloodless short stories, twaddle, and mean-spirited verse.

AMBROSE

How dare you come here to criticize me?

GERTRUDE

I'm not the only one. I remember what the poet William Greer Harrison wrote about you in the *Argonaut*.

AMBROSE

Who gives a hoot what he says. Harrison's a damned insurance broker, not a poet. All he has is his pen to suck on and his thumbs to count.

GERTRUDE

Mr. Harrison wrote that the world laughs at Ambrose Bierce...

AMBROSE

Enough.

GERTRUDE

That you plagiarize from yourself...

AMBROSE

No more.

GERTRUDE

That you're the most complete literary failure of the century...

AMBROSE

Cease, dammit.

GERTRUDE

That you're a mere signpost marking the wreck of an utterly wasted life and the grave of a literary bully.

AMBROSE

I've already written Harrison's obituary. 'All silent now, nor sound nor sense remains; though riddances of worms improve his brains.' As for you, how dare you show me such little respect by throwing in my face the words of some cracked louse?

GERTRUDE

Oh, ho, so you expected me to be a pilgrim carrying incense, wending my way to the shrine in order to sit at the feet of the Master.

AMBROSE

I'm outraged.

GERTRUDE

Yes. *Master*. That's what your sycophants call you, the alleged poet George Sterling and the rest. Master, indeed.

AMBROSE

*(Climbs to his feet. His face is red, eyes tearing with anger. Breathes hard.)*  
Excuse me, Mrs. Atherton. I must take your leave for now.

GERTRUDE

Mr. Bierce...

*(Reaches out her hand)*

AMBROSE

I need to catch my breath.

*(He steps backward, bows, then leaves the porch and walks away, stabbing his walking stick into the ground, before flopping, breathing hard, into another chair. She sips her lemonade nodding as if self-satisfied at first, which changes to a look of conscience. After a pause, she tentatively walks over to him.)*

GERTRUDE

Mr. Bierce, I'm afraid I was terribly rude to you.

AMBROSE

Indeed.

GERTRUDE

I don't know what possessed me. You have my sincerest apology.

AMBROSE

*(Calmer now)*  
Perhaps I overreacted.

GERTRUDE

A truce, Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

A truce, Mrs. Atherton.

*(They shake hands.)*  
He holds her hand slightly longer than he should.)

AMBROSE

*(Looks at his watch)*  
I believe it's time for luncheon, my dear, where we may continue our illuminating chat.  
*(Stands)*

CURTAIN

### SCENE III

*(Atherton and Bierce sit by a window in the dining room, drinking coffee after their luncheon.)*

GERTRUDE

Do you feel the same way about cats as you do dogs, Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

Absolutely not, Mrs. Atherton. Cats have a distinctly useful purpose. They are a soft, indestructible automaton provided by nature to be kicked when things go wrong.

GERTRUDE

That's not particularly funny.

AMBROSE

It wasn't particularly intended to be funny.

GERTRUDE

At times, I question your humor.

AMBROSE

And I question humor that fails the test of wit.

GERTRUDE

As much as I respect you as a writer, I find you too often caustic and biting.

AMBROSE

We've covered this ground, young lady. You were well aware of my writing, my work, and my reputation well before you stepped from train—in what one might say was a form of adulation, as you hinted in your letters.

GERTRUDE

Me? Adulation?

AMBROSE

*(Slightly embarrassed by his own bombast)*  
I intended the term as a figure of speech.

GERTRUDE

Such nonsense aside, I suppose I did have some curiosity...

AMBROSE

Regarding myself?

GERTRUDE

As to why you are so hated. Yet admired within certain quarters.

AMBROSE

Did you know we're all hypnotists?

GERTRUDE

Unlikely, although I've given the subject no thought.

AMBROSE

Hypnotism's a mysterious force. Why is one person loved more than another who is better worthy of that love?

GERTRUDE

You're not saying that hypnotism...

AMBROSE

The person who's better loved than one more deservedly has what's called personal magnetism. Some people have the quality to draw other people to them just as a magnet attracts steel. Have you, Mrs. Atherton, ever, by oral argument, convinced anyone that he was wrong and you were right?

GERTRUDE

*(Thinks for a moment)*  
Yes.

AMBROSE

But I venture to say that it wasn't by your eloquence, but through your unconscious hypnotism.

GERTRUDE

Oh, blather. Another of your cynical spoofs, which make little sense.

AMBROSE

No, no. One's success in influencing another depends on his hypnotic power, his opportunities of exerting it, and the other's susceptibility. Look at Congress. The members vote predictably no matter how convincing the arguments are for or against. They do the bidding of their more magnetic party leaders. Converting the heathen isn't done by talking, Mrs. Atherton, nor, by extension, will logical argument make one loved. I admit my own ability to hypnotize is limited. As a result, I'm content to be hated. Yet occasionally admired.

GERTRUDE

Your argument's specious. Even *you* desire love.

AMBROSE

An argument I'm not willing to concede.

GERTRUDE

Love has ramifications all of its own and has nothing to do with worthiness, personal magnetism, or hypnosis. Try again.

AMBROSE

You dismiss my argument cavalierly, young lady.

GERTRUDE

Perhaps you're right. Your own ability to hypnotize *is* limited. And I don't appreciate being referred to as 'young lady.' I'm a woman in her thirties.

AMBROSE

You are, indeed, an emancipated woman.

GERTRUDE

*(Sniffs)*

Hardly, sir. I won't become emancipated until women's suffrage comes about. When do you suppose that'll be? It's eighteen ninety-one. Am I to wait twenty or thirty years from now?

AMBROSE

What's your rush? Men and women have survived without suffrage since time immemorial. What's a few more years?

GERTRUDE

Precisely what I'd expect you to say. After all, *you* have the right to vote and we don't.

AMBROSE

Perhaps I'm old fashioned...

GERTRUDE

No, *you*?

AMBROSE

...but I'd like to know how the enlargement of a woman's sphere by her entrance into various activities of commercial, professional, industrial, and political life benefits the sex? Whatever employment women have obtained has been by displacing men who would otherwise be supporting women. Where's the general advantage?

GERTRUDE

The general advantage, sir, is that it gives women the same opportunity as men to succeed, and in the same fields. It allows women to broaden their minds and horizons in the way that men do. And I believe that's salutary for the general population.

AMBROSE

No woman's under obligation to sacrifice herself to the good of her sex by foregoing employment so that it may fall to a man. But it's my opinion that the enlargement of women's opportunities hasn't benefited the sex as a whole. And I believe it's distinctly damaged the race.

GERTRUDE

They'd never call you progressive, would they, Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

Not without a duel, Mrs. Atherton.

GERTRUDE

What you do is to sit back and survey the world around you, find fault with it, cynically ridicule it, and not once offer a suggestion as to how to advance society.

AMBROSE

I'm not employed to advance society.

GERTRUDE

But most thinking people are obliged to try.

AMBROSE

I view myself as an observer. And did I understand you to suggest that I'm not a thinking person?

GERTRUDE

Oh, how you *think*. But you support no cause, see no need for change. You deal in ridicule and sarcasm. You play the cynic's role. You stand for nothing.

AMBROSE

I think I've had about enough of you. No matter what I say—

GERTRUDE

No matter what you say you talk like an old crank.

AMBROSE

How dare you.

GERTRUDE

I dare, I dare indeed.

*(They sip their coffee in moody silence. Bierce refuses to look at Atherton until she withdraws a small, flat case from her purse and removes a cigarette. She puts the cigarette in her mouth.)*

AMBROSE

Mrs. Atherton... The cigarette.

GERTRUDE

May I have a light, Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

The hotel frowns on women—

GERTRUDE

Who smoke? In their precious dining room? I'm sure I'll have no difficulty if you intervene on my behalf.

AMBROSE

There are those who feel it improper.

GERTRUDE

Then I'm sure you'll be able to convince them otherwise.

*(Bierce reluctantly finds a match in his coat. She places her hand on his as he lights the cigarette. Atherton inhales and returns the smoke through her nostrils.)*

AMBROSE

I'm somewhat tired and my breathing's delicate. I need a short rest. Perhaps you'd care to accompany me to my room. Unless you're shy... or afraid.

GERTRUDE

I'm neither shy nor afraid, nor am I a woman who is conventional—as you understand the word.

*(Stands)*

CURTAIN

## SCENE IV

*(Hotel room with a table and lamp, chest-of drawers, narrow bed, chair beside it, and a window. A bottle of chloroform is on the table. Atherton sits in the chair as he sprawls on the bed. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply. Uncomfortable and ignored, Atherton squirms in her chair.)*

GERTRUDE

Mr. Bierce?

*(No answer)*

GERTRUDE

Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

Yes?

GERTRUDE

Are you falling asleep?

AMBROSE

No, my dear.

GERTRUDE

Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

Yes?

GERTRUDE

You're sure you're not going to sleep?

AMBROSE

Simply resting my eyes.

GERTRUDE

Your eyes need resting?

AMBROSE

Yes.

GERTRUDE

Perhaps I should—

AMBROSE

*(Sharply)*

Perhaps, Mrs. Atherton, you should remain silent for a few moments to allow me to regain my vigor.

GERTRUDE

*(Stands)*

You're rude.

AMBROSE

*(Opens his eyes)*

I, rude? I simply asked for a few moments of quiet.

GERTRUDE

If it's solitude you wish, I can certainly arrange that. I didn't come here to Sunol for solitude.

AMBROSE

*(Sits up)*

You're starting to become hysterical.

GERTRUDE

The pot calling the kettle black, I'd say.

AMBROSE

You're challenging my sanity by using a common cliché, unworthy of a proper writer. And sanity is the state of mind that immediately precedes murder.

GERTRUDE

Am I to take that as a threat?

AMBROSE

I'm too much of a gentleman to threaten a naive girl such as yourself.

GERTRUDE

Gentleman? You? A gentleman doesn't fling himself on a bed in a woman's presence, close his eyes, and begin to snore.

AMBROSE

Dammit, I did not snore.

*(His face and ears turn red. His breathing becomes coarse. He gasps for air. He gropes for the chloroform bottle but bumps it from the side table. The bottle smashes as it falls to the floor. The room fills with sweet, sickening fumes, which Atherton tries to wave away before running to the window and opening it. Then she returns to the bed and puts her hand on his arm.)*

GERTRUDE

Mr. Bierce, are you all right?

AMBROSE

The asthma.  
*(Chokes)*

GERTRUDE

The broken bottle. It smells of chloroform.

AMBROSE

For my breathing.  
*(Gasps)*

GERTRUDE

Lie back, Mr. Bierce, lie back.

AMBROSE

*(Wheezing, he reclines on the bed.)*

GERTRUDE

What can I do?

AMBROSE

*(Waves his hand)*

Nothing. Just give me a minute.

*(Breathing heavily, he gradually composes himself. His eyes close. Sleeps. Snores. Atherton's face shows concern, a bit of guilt, but not too much.)*

GERTRUDE

*(Speaking to Bierce as he snores softly, knowing he's asleep)*

You're insufferable. I despise people who are so unalterably convinced of their own genius and correctness they dismiss out of hand the views of others. Besides, too many Californians consider you to be the final arbiter on matters ranging from literature to politics. Who are you anyway but a middle-aged blowhard, convinced of your own infallibility. Still, still, there's something vulnerable about you. A blusterer who tries desperately to hide your susceptibility using wind and steam. You're a melancholy soul. And, for a man of your age, quite... quite... Dammit, as if anyone needs to ask. Beautiful.

AMBROSE

*(Opens his eyes)*

Did you say something, Mrs. Atherton?

GERTRUDE

I said, how are you feeling, Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

Better now. Sometimes I need to rest after a meal. The asthma...

GERTRUDE

*(She puts her hand on his. He takes it, squeezes it)*

I was angry. Perhaps I was hard on you.

AMBROSE

No, no, my dear. I was hard on you.

GERTRUDE

Nonsense.

AMBROSE

And you're right. I can't write novels. I lack the attention span.

GERTRUDE

But you're a great writer.

AMBROSE

I'm a hack. A failure. I'm in the employ of William Randolph Hearst. The money he spends for a single Egyptian mummy in its case would feed my family for a year. Two years, three. I've spent virtually my entire life writing and have little to show for it but three slim volumes of humor published in England when I was a young man, and a tiny book of stories about combat and the indefinable. I write for a man I barely respect, who is not content to merely cover the news. He creates it, and then trumpets his ugly triumphs in vile and obscene headlines. He wants to orchestrate a war for the sake of circulation. By God, some day he'll do it. And my name's associated with William Randolph Hearst.

GERTRUDE

But your stories...

AMBROSE

All published in newspapers. Read, then discarded. Suitable for wrapping fish and garbage.

GERTRUDE

The stories in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* are brilliant.

AMBROSE

But bloodless. Cold as ice. Twaddle.

GERTRUDE

I'm sorry I said that. Your fiction is as good or better as any I've ever read. No one has written about the Civil War with such clarity and keenness, and your supernatural stories are as chilling as Poe's.

AMBROSE

Thank you, my dear.

*(Rolls his legs to the floor and sits up on the bed)*

And I didn't mean it when I said your fiction was pap. You're a fine novelist and someday you'll be a great one.

GERTRUDE

I know.

AMBROSE

*(Looks at his watch)*

Your train's shortly to arrive, Mrs. Atherton.

*(Stands)*

CURTAIN

## SCENE V

*(Train platform, which is next to a pigsty. They hear the GRUNTS of the pigs.)*

AMBROSE

Look at those pigs, Mrs. Atherton. Right next to a railroad track. Doing what pigs do. Eating and rutting.

GERTRUDE

Which is not unlike what humans do.

AMBROSE

A pig's closely allied to the human race by the splendor and vivacity of its appetite, which, however, is inferior in scope because the pig, at least, stays at being a pig.

GERTRUDE

A pity humans don't do the same.

AMBROSE

I must apologize for being so cantankerous, my dear. The stress of losing my son and the flare-up of my asthma made me somewhat disagreeable.

GERTRUDE

I thrive on disagreement.

AMBROSE

Indisputable, Mrs. Atherton.

*(They hear the WHISTLE as the train approaches. Suddenly, Bierce seizes her in his arms and put his lips on hers. She doesn't struggle but she doesn't kiss him back. His mouth presses against hers but there's a hard resistance. Like stone. He stops and steps back.)*

GERTRUDE

*(Throws back her head and laughs)*

The Almighty God Bierce. Master of style. The god on Olympus at whose feet pilgrims come to worship.

AMBROSE

You're an outrage.

GERTRUDE

Kissing a woman next to a pigsty as a choo-choo approaches.

AMBROSE

You detestable little vixen.

GERTRUDE

The Master.

AMBROSE

*(Grabs her arm and half drags her to the train platform as the locomotive, HISSING, pulls in.)*

AMBROSE

I never want to see you as long as you live.

GERTRUDE

*(Laughs again)*

AMBROSE

I've had a horrible day. And you're the one who's made it horrible.

GERTRUDE

Isn't that odd, Mr. Bierce. I've had a wonderful time. I've learned something about you.

AMBROSE

What, pray?

GERTRUDE

That the Master's human. Pitiful yet audacious, miserable while gallant, insecure but unafraid, pontifical although unfeigned. I'm half in love with you.

*(Skips gaily aboard the train and waves)*

Shall we stay in touch, Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

*(Mixed expression of anger and defeat)*

CURTAIN

END