

Classic Poetry Series

Ambrose Bierce

- poems -

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"Alone"

In contact, lo! the flint and steel,
By sharp and flame, the thought reveal
That he the metal, she the stone,
Had cherished secretly alone.

Booley Fito.

Ambrose Bierce

"Decalogue"

Thou shalt no God but me adore:
'Twere too expensive to have more.

No images nor idols make
For Roger Ingersoll to break.

Take not God's name in vain: select
A time when it will have effect.

Work not on Sabbath days at all,
But go to see the teams play ball.

Honor thy parents. That creates
For life insurance lower rates.

Kill not, abet not those who kill;
Thou shalt not pay thy butcher's bill.

Kiss not thy neighbor's wife, unless
Thine own thy neighbor doth caress.

Don't steal; thou'lt never thus compete
Successfully in business. Cheat.

Bear not false witness--that is low--
But "hear 'tis rumored so and so."

Covet thou naught that thou hast got
By hook or crook, or somehow, got.

Ambrose Bierce

"Elegy"

The cur foretells the knell of parting day;
The loafing herd winds slowly o'er the lea;
The wise man homewards plods; I only stay
To fiddle-faddle in a minor key.

Ambrose Bierce

"Freedom"

Freedom, as every schoolboy knows,
Once shrieked as Kosciusko fell;
On every wind, indeed, that blows
I hear her yell.

She screams whenever monarchs meet,
And parliaments as well,
To bind the chains about her feet
And toll her knell.

And when the sovereign people cast
The votes they cannot spell,
Upon the pestilential blast
Her clamors swell.

For all to whom the power's given
To sway or to compel,
Among themselves apportion Heaven
And give her Hell.

Blary O'Gary.

Ambrose Bierce

"Piety"

The pig is taught by sermons and epistles
To think the God of Swine has snout and bristles.

Judibras.

Ambrose Bierce

"Rimer"

The rimer quenches his unheeded fires,
The sound surceases and the sense expires.
Then the domestic dog, to east and west,
Expounds the passions burning in his breast.
The rising moon o'er that enchanted land
Pauses to hear and yearns to understand.

Ambrose Bierce

"Safety-Clutch"

Once I seen a human ruin
In a elevator-well.
And his members was bestrewin'
All the place where he had fell.

And I says, apostrophisin'
That uncommon woful wreck:
"Your position's so surprisin'
That I tremble for your neck!"

Then that ruin, smilin' sadly
And impressive, up and spoke:
"Well, I wouldn't tremble badly,
For it's been a fortnight broke."

Then, for further comprehension
Of his attitude, he begs
I will focus my attention
On his various arms and legs--

How they all are contumacious;
Where they each, respective, lie;
How one trotter proves ungracious,
T' other one an alibi.

These particulars is mentioned
For to show his dismal state,
Which I wasn't first intentioned
To specifical relate.

None is worser to be dreaded
That I ever have heard tell
Than the gent's who there was spreaded
In that elevator-well.

Now this tale is allegoric--
It is figurative all,
For the well is metaphoric
And the feller didn't fall.

I opine it isn't moral
For a writer-man to cheat,
And despise to wear a laurel
As was gotten by deceit.

For 'tis Politics intended
By the elevator, mind,
It will boost a person splendid
If his talent is the kind.

Col. Bryan had the talent
(For the busted man is him)

And it shot him up right gallant
Till his head began to swim.

Then the rope it broke above him
And he painful came to earth
Where there's nobody to love him
For his detrimented worth.

Though he's living' none would know him,
Or at leastwise not as such.
Moral of this woful poem:
Frequent oil your safety-clutch.

Ambrose Bierce

"Weather"

Once I dipt into the future far as human eye could see,
And I saw the Chief Forecaster, dead as any one can be--
Dead and damned and shut in Hades as a liar from his birth,
With a record of unreason seldome paralleled on earth.
While I looked he reared him solemnly, that incandescent youth,
From the coals that he'd preferred to the advantages of truth.
He cast his eyes about him and above him; then he wrote
On a slab of thin asbestos what I venture here to quote--
For I read it in the rose-light of the everlasting glow:
"Cloudy; variable winds, with local showers; cooler; snow."

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An Inscription

A conqueror as provident as brave,
He robbed the cradle to supply the grave.
His reign laid quantities of human dust:
He fell upon the just and the unjust.

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The New Decalogue

Have but one God: thy knees were sore
If bent in prayer to three or four.

Adore no images save those
The coinage of thy country shows.

Take not the Name in vain. Direct
Thy swearing unto some effect.

Thy hand from Sunday work be held--
Work not at all unless compelled.

Honor thy parents, and perchance
Their wills thy fortunes may advance.

Kill not--death liberates thy foe
From persecution's constant woe.

Kiss not thy neighbor's wife. Of course
There's no objection to divorce.

To steal were folly, for 'tis plain
In cheating there is greater pain.

Bear not false witness. Shake your head
And say that you have 'heard it said.'

Who stays to covet ne'er will catch
An opportunity to snatch.

Ambrose Bierce

The Statesmen

How blest the land that counts among
Her sons so many good and wise,
To execute great feats of tongue
When troubles rise.

Behold them mounting every stump,
By speech our liberty to guard.
Observe their courage--see them jump,
And come down hard!

'Walk up, walk up!' each cries aloud,
'And learn from me what you must do
To turn aside the thunder cloud,
The earthquake too.

'Beware the wiles of yonder quack
Who stuffs the ears of all that pass.
I--I alone can show that black
Is white as grass.'

They shout through all the day and break
The silence of the night as well.
They'd make--I wish they'd go and make--
Of Heaven a Hell.

A advocates free silver, B
Free trade and C free banking laws.
Free board, clothes, lodging would from me
Win wamr applause.

Lo, D lifts up his voice: 'You see
The single tax on land would fall
On all alike.' More evenly
No tax at all.

'With paper money,' bellows E,
'We'll all be rich as lords.' No doubt--
And richest of the lot will be
The chap without.

As many 'cures' as addle-wits
Who know not what the ailment is!
Meanwhile the patient foams and spits
Like a gin fizz.

Alas, poor Body Politic,
Your fate is all too clearly read:
To be not altogether quick,
Nor very dead.

You take your exercise in squirms,
Your rest in fainting fits between.

'Tis plain that your disorder's worms--
Worms fat and lean.

Worm Capital, Worm Labor dwell
Within your maw and muscle's scope.
Their quarrels make your life a Hell,
Your death a hope.

God send you find not such an end
To ills however sharp and huge!
God send you convalesce! God send
You vermifuge.

Ambrose Bierce

To the Bartholdi Statue

O Liberty, God-gifted--
Young and immortal maid--
In your high hand uplifted,
The torch declares your trade.

Its crimson menace, flaming
Upon the sea and shore,
Is, trumpet-like, proclaiming
That Law shall be no more.

Austere incendiary,
We're blinking in the light;
Where is your customary
Grenade of dynamite?

Where are your staves and switches
For men of gentle birth?
Your mask and dirk for riches?
Your chains for wit and worth?

Perhaps, you've brought the halters
You used in the old days,
When round religion's altars
You stabled Cromwell's bays?

Behind you, unsuspected,
Have you the axe, fair wench,
Wherewith you once collected
A poll-tax for the French?

America salutes you--
Preparing to 'disgorge.'
Take everything that suits you,
And marry Henry George.

Ambrose Bierce

Weather

Once I dipt into the future far as human eye could see,
And I saw the Chief Forecaster, dead as any one can be--
Dead and damned and shut in Hades as a liar from his birth,
With a record of unreason seldome paralleled on earth.
While I looked he reared him solemnly, that incandescent youth,
From the coals that he'd preferred to the advantages of truth.
He cast his eyes about him and above him; then he wrote
On a slab of thin asbestos what I venture here to quote--
For I read it in the rose-light of the everlasting glow:
'Cloudy; variable winds, with local showers; cooler; snow.'

Ambrose Bierce

With a Book

Words shouting, singing, smiling, frowning--
 Sense lacking.
Ah, nothing, more obscure than Browning,
 Save blacking.

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