

AMBROSE AND GERTRUDE

One-Act Play
by Don Swaim

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, 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 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 before going on to my hotel?

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

GERTRUDE

Let me say that I read about the death of your son. 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 (beat) 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.

AMBROSE

I knew you were a widow.

GERTRUDE

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

It's been bandied about that after the ship docked in San Francisco, they brought the barrel of rum with George's body inside to my door. Untrue. By the time I got him there was no barrel, no rum. George is buried with his parents in the family mausoleum. However, I refused to look at George's body. I'm in horror of corpses. It was all so difficult for me, and I had to waste money on a widow's attire.

AMBROSE

Death's always difficult (beat) for the living.

GERTRUDE

To be candid, 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. My daughter Muriel, who's thirteen, resides with her grandmother while I attempt to expand my skills as an author.

AMBROSE

I have two remaining children, Mrs. Atherton. Leigh and Helen live with their mother.

GERTRUDE

What about your wife, Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

I see her no longer, Mrs. Atherton. We've separated.

GERTRUDE

My sympathy.

AMBROSE

Twenty years with her also served its purpose.

GERTRUDE

(Giggles)

AMBROSE

I've been in isolation too much, my dear. William Randolph Hearst makes that 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 received some distressing news the other day. About my friend Prentice Mulford.

GERTRUDE

I've read some of Mr. Mulford's little tales. About mining in the frontier, as I recall.

AMBROSE

He's dead.

GERTRUDE

A shame.

AMBROSE

Not yet sixty. Found his body, wrapped in a blanket, in a small boat in Sheepshead Bay. His banjo was by his side. No one knows how he died. He may have been trying to sail from Manhattan to Sag Harbor at the time of his death.

GERTRUDE

Does it qualify as a mystery?

AMBROSE

It qualifies as a suicide. The fool was crazy in love. He'd met a little tramp named Josie in London, a city I loved and he detested. He called the British Museum an intellectual charnel

house. Mulford brought Josie to America. We all tried to talk him out of it, my friends Stoddard, and Miller, and I. After he returned to Sag Harbor, where he was born, he found out she'd been posing nude for commercial artists. For the extra money, she claimed. God knows Mulford brought home none. One day, he opened a package of cheap cigarettes and saw on it a picture of Josie. The girl was stark naked.

GERTRUDE

Shocking.

AMBROSE

They separated. But he mourned the slut. He retired as a hermit to a New Jersey swamp, to live in a boat with only mosquitoes and snakes as friends. He wanted nothing, had nothing but a few clothes, a spirit lamp, pen and paper. A banjo. He turned out five-cent tracts about spiritualism, faith healing, and other tommyrot. God knows Prentice Mulford wasn't endowed with common sense. Although once, twenty years ago in San Francisco, he was the only one of us sots who was sober enough NOT to climb up a hill to pull down some wretched Christian cross, which we all detested. I'll give him that.

GERTRUDE

Perhaps Prentice Mulford was on to something, and you weren't.

AMBROSE

He wasn't on to anything. Taking part in séances, claiming to have talked to the ghosts of John Wilkes Booth, Socrates, and an Indian maiden named Wawona. 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

Nonsense. You simply stumbled.

GERTRUDE

No, I'm prone to accidents. Once, I drank part of a glass of ammonia thinking it was water and nearly had to have my stomach pumped. I'm a walking calamity.

AMBROSE

My dear, calamities are of two kind. Misfortune to ourselves, and good fortune to others.

CURTAIN

SCENE II

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

GERTRUDE

Mr. Bierce, you never answered the question I wrote you about.

AMBROSE

Which one, my dear?

GERTRUDE

Why you dislike dogs so much.

AMBROSE

I can give you many reasons.

(Snorts)

Once, in St. Helena, I was walking through the woods with my daughter when a dog attacked us. The beast snapped at our legs and ankles. I saw an indolent looking fellow 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

Was I to allow some dog to assault us? I walked over to the man and asked him why he hadn't called his dog away.

GERTRUDE

What did he say?

AMBROSE

The fellow 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, my dear.

GERTRUDE

Have you ever shot a man?

AMBROSE

(Wary)
I (beat) I think your question's best reserved for our discussion about dogs.
(Becomes expansive)
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

(Laughs)
Amusing, but it still doesn't answer my question.

AMBROSE

My dear, the trouble with the modern dog is that he's the same old dog. Not an inch has the rascal advanced along the line of evolution. Take man for example.

GERTRUDE

Yes?

AMBROSE

We've ceased to squat upon 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. Perhaps they were always intended to be the companion to our breed.

AMBROSE

Bosh. Nothing in our existence is intended to be, dogs included. 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 much too condescending to me. My views about religion are, no doubt, not much different from yours. But back to your position on dogs...

AMBROSE

The dog's a detestable quadruped. The word 'dog' is a term of contempt the world over. Poets and essayists have written of the virtues of individual dogs, but no one has ever eulogized the species. Man loves his own dog but not all dogs.

GERTRUDE

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

AMBROSE

Precisely, my dear. Man loves his own dog because that thrifty creature, ever cadging when not marauding, tickles man's vanity by fawning upon him as the visible source of steaks and bones. And also because the graceless beast insults everyone else, biting as many as he dares.

GERTRUDE

That's an exaggeration.

AMBROSE

I never exaggerate, young lady. The dog's an encampment of fleas and a reservoir of sinful smells. He has no manners. No discrimination. His loyalty's given to the person who feeds him, whether his master's honorable or a blackguard.

GERTRUDE

Your criticism could apply to humans as well as dogs. Have you not known humans to be encampments of fleas and reservoirs of sinful smells?

AMBROSE

(Throws up his hands)

It's hopeless speaking to you on this subject. Women adore not only dogs but the entire disgusting species. Then, of course, a woman will love anything.

GERTRUDE

That, sir, is an insult.

AMBROSE

Women even love men who love dogs. Tell me, have you ever kissed a dog?

GERTRUDE

Of course, I've kissed a dog. And cats as well. Fuzzy, furry, vulnerable little creatures, they are.

AMBROSE

Aha. Likely you've kissed more dogs and cats than men.

GERTRUDE

True or not, remember that I'm a widow, sir, and my preferred state.

AMBROSE

It's my opinion that the female, widow or otherwise, who holds a dog to her heart is without other lodgers, namely those of the human male species.

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

I meant no personal insult. But if that's the way you feel about it, 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)

GERTRUDE

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

AMBROSE

As I recall, it was you who raised the subject.

GERTRUDE

And now I'm making an effort to raise the conversation to higher level.

AMBROSE

And I, for one, would appreciate such an effort.

GERTRUDE

The novel.

AMBROSE

(Shakes his head)

Don't waste your time thinking about the novel.

GERTRUDE

Waste my time? That's precisely what I want to compose. I've already written 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

My dear, I read the *Argonaut* even though I've no use for its owner, Frank Pixley. I once worked as an editor for the bugger, you know.

GERTRUDE

Mr. Pixley paid me one-hundred-fifty dollars for *The Randolphs of Redwoods*. My very first attempt at a novel was published as a serial.

AMBROSE

And how do you feel about it?

GERTRUDE

Embarrassed.

AMBROSE

Understandably.

GERTRUDE

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

AMBROSE

Are you embarrassed by it as well? The novel, I mean.

GERTRUDE

It was published. 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

And 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, and new. Not to mention written in dialect, which I despise.

GERTRUDE

You're asserting 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.

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's 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 or three-quarters.

GERTRUDE

(Exasperated)
Sir, the novel affords the writer the opportunity of developing character in the way a short story can't. It allows the telling of a story that may take place over many years, generations in fact, with many, many characters.

AMBROSE

No, no, no. The novel bears the same relation to literature that a panorama bears 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

Somebody should. 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 ever 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 in my analysis of your potential.

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

(Shakes his finger at her)
Twaddle? Mean-spirited? How dare you come here to criticize me in that way?

GERTRUDE

I'm not the only one who's critical of you. I remember what the poet and playwright William Greer Harrison wrote about you in the *Argonaut*.

AMBROSE

Harrison? Who gives a hoot what he says. Harrison's a damned insurance broker, not a poet. All he has is his pen to suck 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 only a 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 the words of this cracked louse in my face?

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 a moment.

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, young lady.

GERTRUDE

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

AMBROSE

(Calmer now)

Perhaps I overreacted, Mrs. Atherton.

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 our luncheon, my dear.

(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.

GERTRUDE

Oh?

AMBROSE

Cats 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 long before you stepped off the train to pay homage to me.

GERTRUDE

Homage?

AMBROSE

(Embarrassed by his own bombast)
A figure of speech, Mrs. Atherton.

GERTRUDE

I suppose I did have some curiosity...

AMBROSE

About me?

GERTRUDE

As to why you are so hated... and loved.

AMBROSE

Did you know we're all hypnotists?

GERTRUDE

I haven't given the subject thought.

AMBROSE

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

GERTRUDE

You're not saying that hypnotism...

AMBROSE

Yes. The person who's better loved than the more worthy candidate has what's called personal magnetism. Some people actually have the quality to draw other persons to them just like 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 not often. I venture to say that if you did succeed, it wasn't by your cogency and eloquence, it was through unconscious hypnotism that you did the trick.

GERTRUDE

Oh, blather.

AMBROSE

Your success in convincing another person depends on the degree of your hypnotic power, your opportunities of exerting it, and the other's susceptibility to it. Look at the members of Congress. They vote predictably, no matter how convincing the arguments to pass or defeat certain legislation. And generally they do the bidding of their more magnetic party leaders. Converting the heathen can't be done by talking, Mrs. Atherton, nor will logical argument make one loved. I admit my ability to hypnotize is somewhat limited. As a result, I'm quite content to be hated... and occasionally loved.

GERTRUDE

Your argument's quite specious, Mr. Bierce.

AMBROSE

Is it now?

GERTRUDE

Who's to say that one person is more worthy of love than another? And what do you mean by worthy? 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

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

AMBROSE

(Glares at her)
You're 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. Are we to wait twenty or thirty years from now?

AMBROSE

What's the 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. What's the hurry? 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 (beat) and in the same fields. It allows women to broaden their minds and horizons in the very 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 needed employment in the hope it may fall to a man gifted with dependent women. 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 fight, 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

No one's employed to advance society, 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...

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, Mr. Bierce.

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 conventional woman, as you've seen.
(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, 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, if you'll be silent for a few moments I'll regain my vigor.

GERTRUDE

(Stands)

Be silent? 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 all the way 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. And sanity's the state of mind which immediately precedes and follows 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, indeed. 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, 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

Mr. Bierce.

(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.

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 me for a year. Two years, three. Four. 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 labor for a man I barely respect. A man who's not content to cover the news. He creates it, and then trumpets his meager 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 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, Mr. Bierce.

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 train 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.

(Skips gaily aboard the train and waves)

Shall we stay in touch, Mr. Bierce?

AMBROSE

(Mixed expression of anger and defeat)

CURTAIN

END

[For information about this play contact: biercemaster@verizon.net]