

**IN THE MIDST OF LIFE:  
TALES OF SOLDIERS  
AND CIVILIANS**

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In the midst of life: tales of soldiers and civilians by Ambrose Bierce

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**AMBROSE BIERCE**

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AND CIVILIANS**



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Tales of Soldiers and Civilians

BY

AMBROSE BIERCE



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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE SUITABLE SURROUNDINGS . . . . .	1
THE NIGHT . . . . .	1
THE DAY BEFORE . . . . .	4
THE DAY AFTER . . . . .	8

### *SOLDIERS*

A HORSEMAN IN THE SKY . . . . .	15
AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE . . . . .	25
CHICKAMAUGA . . . . .	41
A SON OF THE GODS . . . . .	51
ONE OF THE MISSING . . . . .	63
KILLED AT RESACA . . . . .	83
THE AFFAIR AT COULTER'S NOTCH . . . . .	93
A TOUGH TUSSELE . . . . .	107
THE COUP DE GRACE . . . . .	121
PARKER ADDERSON, PHILOSOPHER . . . . .	131

*CIVILIANS*

	PAGE
A WATCHER BY THE DEAD. . . . .	145
THE MAN AND THE SNAKE . . . . .	163
A HOLY TERROR . . . . .	175
AN INHABITANT OF CARCOSA . . . . .	197
THE BOARDED WINDOW . . . . .	208
THE MIDDLE TOE OF THE RIGHT FOOT. . . . .	211
HAÏTA THE SHEPHERD . . . . .	225
AN HEIRESS FROM REDHORSE . . . . .	235

# IN THE MIDST OF LIFE

## *THE SUITABLE SURROUNDINGS*

### THE NIGHT

ONE midsummer night a farmer's boy living about ten miles from the city of Cincinnati, was following a bridle path through a dense and dark forest. He had been searching for some missing cows, and at nightfall found himself a long way from home, and in a part of the country with which he was only partly familiar. But he was a stout-hearted lad, and, knowing his general direction from his home, he plunged into the forest without hesitation, guided by the stars. Coming into the bridle path, and observing that it ran in the right direction, he followed it.

The night was clear, but in the woods it was exceedingly dark. It was more by the sense of touch than by that of sight that the lad kept the path. He could not, indeed, very easily go astray; the undergrowth on both sides was so thick as to be almost impenetrable. He had gone into the forest a mile or more when he was surprised to see a feeble gleam



of light shining through the foliage skirting the path on his left. The sight of it startled him, and set his heart beating audibly.

'The old Breede house is somewhere about here,' he said to himself. 'This must be the other end of the path which we reach it by from our side. Ugh! what should a light be doing there? I don't like it.'

Nevertheless, he pushed on. A moment later and he had emerged from the forest into a small, open space, mostly upgrown to brambles. There were remnants of a rotting fence. A few yards from the trail, in the middle of the clearing, was the house, from which the light came through an unglazed window. The window had once contained glass, but that and its supporting frame had long ago yielded to missiles flung by hands of venturesome boys, to attest alike their courage and their hostility to the supernatural; for the Breede house bore the evil reputation of being haunted. Possibly it was not, but even the hardest sceptic could not deny that it was deserted—which, in rural regions, is much the same thing.

Looking at the mysterious dim light shining from the ruined window, the boy remembered with apprehension that his own hand had assisted at the destruction. His penitence was, of course, poignant in proportion to its tardiness and inefficacy. He half expected to be set upon by all the unworldly and bodiless malevolences whom he had outraged by assisting to break alike their windows and their

peace. Yet this stubborn lad, shaking in every limb, would not retreat. The blood in his veins was strong and rich with the iron of the frontiersman. He was but two removes from the generation which had subdued the Indian. He started to pass the house.

As he was going by, he looked in at the blank window space, and saw a strange and terrifying sight—the figure of a man seated in the centre of the room, at a table upon which lay some loose sheets of paper. The elbows rested on the table, the hands supporting the head, which was uncovered. On each side the fingers were pushed into the hair. The face showed pale in the light of a single candle a little to one side. The flame illuminated that side of the face, the other was in deep shadow. The man's eyes were fixed upon the blank window space with a stare in which an older and cooler observer might have discerned something of apprehension, but which seemed to the lad altogether soulless. He believed the man to be dead.

The situation was horrible, but not without its fascination. The boy paused in his flight to note it all. He endeavoured to still the beating of his heart by holding his breath until half suffocated. He was weak, faint, trembling; he could feel the deathly whiteness of his face. Nevertheless, he set his teeth and resolutely advanced to the house. He had no conscious intention—it was the mere courage of terror. He thrust his white face forward into the

illuminated opening. At that instant a strange, harsh cry, a shriek, broke upon the silence of the night—the note of a screech owl. The man sprang to his feet, overturning the table and extinguishing the candle. The boy took to his heels.

#### THE DAY BEFORE

‘Good-morning, Colston. I am in luck, it seems. You have often said that my commendation of your literary work was mere civility, and here you find me absorbed—actually merged—in your latest story in the *Messenger*. Nothing less shocking than your touch upon my shoulder would have roused me to consciousness.’

‘The proof is stronger than you seem to know,’ replied the man addressed; ‘so keen is your eagerness to read my story that you are willing to renounce selfish considerations and forego all the pleasure that you could get from it.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ said the other, folding the newspaper that he held, and putting it in his pocket. ‘You writers are a queer lot, anyhow. Come, tell me what I have done or omitted in this matter. In what way does the pleasure that I get, or might get, from your work depend on *me*?’

‘In many ways. Let me ask you how you would enjoy your dinner if you took it in this street car. Suppose the phonograph so perfected as to be able to give you an entire opera—singing, orchestration,