

Ambrose Bierce

THE MYSTERY OF THE ULTIMATE HILLS

Ambrose Gwinnet Bierce (1842–c.1914) was an American contemporary of William Morris. He, too, played a major part in the development of the modern fantasy story, as well as writing a number of supernatural and horror tales that are today regarded as classics of their kind. However, perhaps his most important contribution was a little group of stories about the fabled ruined city of Carcosa — stories that, in turn, were to inspire a whole host of similar myth cycles, most prominent among these being H. P. Lovecraft's famous tales of the Cthulhu Mythos. Bierce's own end was, in fact, almost as strange as his stories: not long after travelling to Mexico to join Pancho Villa in 1913, he disappeared from the face of the earth without a single trace! Although much of Bierce's work has appeared in collected form, the bizarre story of 'The Mystery of the Ultimate Hills', which was published in The Scrap Book in July 1913, has so far escaped the net. And in the light of the author's mysterious disappearance just a year later, not to mention the fact that it deals with a future traveller's mission to far-flung parts, it surely is most appropriately included in these pages . . .

In the year 4591 I accepted from his gracious Majesty the Ahkoond of Citrusia a commission to explore the unknown region lying to the eastward of the Ultimate Hills, the range which that learned archeologist, Simeon Tucker, affirms to be identical with the 'Rocky Mountains' of the ancients. For this proof of his Majesty's favor I was indebted, doubtless, to a certain distinction that I had been fortunate enough to acquire by explorations in the heart of Darkest Europe. His Majesty kindly offered to raise and equip a large expeditionary force to accompany me, and I was given the widest discretion in the matter of outfit; I could draw upon the royal treasury for any sum that I might require, and upon the royal university for all the scientific apparatus and assistance necessary to my purpose. Declining these encumbrances, I took my electric rifle and a portable waterproof case containing a few simple instruments and writing materials and set out. Among the instruments was, of course, an aerial isochronophone which I set by the one in the Ahkoond's private dining-room at the palace. His Majesty invariably dined alone at 18 o'clock, and sat at table six hours: it was my intention to send him all my reports at the hour of 23, just as dessert would be served, and he would be in a proper frame of mind to appreciate my discoveries and my services to the Crown.

At 9 o'clock on the 13th of Meijh I left Sanf Rachisco and after a tedious journey of nearly fifty minutes arrived at Bolosson, the eastern terminus of the magnetic tube, on the summit of the Ultimate Hills. According to Tucker this was anciently a station on the Central Peaceful Railroad, and was called 'German', in honor of an illustrious dancing master. Prof. Nupper, however, says it was the ancient Nevbraska, the capital of Kikago, and geographers generally have accepted that view.

Finding nothing at Bolosson to interest me except a fine view of the volcano, Carlema, then in active eruption, I shouldered my electric rifle and with my case of instruments strapped upon my back plunged at once into the wilderness, down the eastern slope. As I descended, the character of the vegetation altered. The pines of the higher altitudes gave place to oaks, these to ash, beech and maple. To these succeeded the tamarack and such trees as affect a moist and marshy habitat;

and finally, when for four months I had been steadily descending, I found myself in a primeval flora consisting mainly of giant ferns, some of them as much as twenty *surindas* in diameter. They grew upon the margins of vast stagnant lakes which I was compelled to navigate by means of rude rafts made from their trunks lashed together with vines.

In the fauna of the region that I had traversed I had noted changes corresponding to those in the flora. On the upper slope there was nothing but the mountain sheep, but I passed successively through the habitats of the bear, the deer and the horse. This last-mentioned creature, which our naturalists have believed long extinct, and which Dorbly declares our ancestors domesticated, I found in vast numbers on high tablelands covered with grass upon which it feeds. The animal answers the current description of the horse very nearly, but all that I saw were destitute of the horns, and none had the characteristic forked tail. This member, on the contrary, is a tassel of straight wiry hair, reaching nearly to the ground – a surprising sight. Lower still I came upon the mastodon, the lion, the tiger, hippopotamus and alligator, all differing very little from those infesting Central Europe, as described in my *Travels in the Forgotten Continent*.

In the lake region where I now found myself, the waters abounded with ichthyosauri, and along the margins the iguanodon dragged his obscene bulk in indolent immunity. Great flocks of pterodactyls, their bodies as large as those of oxen and their necks enormously long, clamored and fought in the air, the broad membranes of their wings making a singular musical humming, unlike anything that I had ever heard. Between them and the ichthyosauri there was incessant battle, and I was constantly reminded of the ancient poet's splendid and original comparison of man to

*dragons of the prime
That tare each other in their slime.*

When brought down with my electric rifle and properly roasted, the pterodactyl proved very good eating, particularly the pads of the toes.

In urging my raft along the shore line of one of the stagnant

lagoons one day I was surprised to find a broad rock jutting out from the shore, its upper surface some ten *coprets* above the water. Disembarking, I ascended it, and on examination recognized it as the remnant of an immense mountain which at one time must have been 5000 *coprets* in height and doubtless the dominating peak of a long range. From the striations all over it I discovered that it had been worn away to its present trivial size by glacial action. Opening my case of instruments, I took out my petrochronologue and applied it to the worn and scratched surface of the rock. The indicator at once pointed to K 59 xpc $\frac{1}{2}$! At this astonishing result I was nearly overcome by excitement: the last erosions of the ice-masses upon this vestige of a stupendous mountain range which they had worn away, had been made as recently as the year 1945! Hastily applying my nymograph, I found that the name of this particular mountain at the time when it began to be enveloped in the mass of ice moving down upon it from the north, was 'Pike's Peak'. Other observations with other instruments showed that at that time the country circumjacent to it had been inhabited by a partly civilized race of people known as Galoots, the name of their capital city being Denver.

That evening at the hour of 23 I set up my aerial isochronophone and reported to his gracious Majesty the Ahkoond as follows:

Sire: I have the honor to report that I have made a startling discovery. The primeval region into which I have penetrated, as I informed you yesterday – the ichthyosaurus belt – was peopled by tribes considerably advanced in some of the arts almost within historic times: in 1920. They were exterminated by a glacial period not exceeding 125 years in duration. Your Majesty can conceive the magnitude and violence of the natural forces which overwhelmed their country with moving sheets of ice not less than 5000 *coprets* in thickness, grinding down every eminence, destroying (of course) all animal and vegetable life and leaving the region a fathomless bog of detritus. Out of this vast sea of mud Nature has had to evolve another creation, beginning *de novo*, with her lowest forms. It has long been known, your Majesty, that the region east of the Ultimate Hills, between

them and the Wintry Sea, was once the seat of an ancient civilization, some scraps and shreds of whose history, arts and literature have been wafted to us across the gulf of time; but it was reserved for your gracious Majesty, through me, your humble and unworthy instrument, to ascertain the astonishing fact that these were a pre-glacial people – that between them and us stands, as it were, a wall of impenetrable ice. That all local records of this unfortunate race have perished your Majesty needs not to be told: we can supplement our present imperfect knowledge of them by instrumental observation only.

To this message I received the following extraordinary reply:

All right – another bottle of – ice goes: push on – this cheese is too – spare no effort to – hand me those nuts – learn all you can – damn you!

His most gracious Majesty was being served with dessert, and served badly.

I now resolved to go directly north toward the source of the ice-flow and investigate its cause, but examining my barometer found that I was more than 8000 *coprets* below the sea-level; the moving ice had not only ground down the face of the country, planing off the eminences and filling the depressions, but its enormous weight had caused the earth's crust to sag, and with the lessening of the weight from evaporation it had not recovered.

I had no desire to continue in this depression, as I should in going north, for I should find nothing but lakes, marshes and ferneries, infested with the same primitive and monstrous forms of life. So I continued my course eastward and soon had the satisfaction to find myself meeting the sluggish current of such streams as I encountered in my way. By vigorous use of the new double-distance telepode, which enables the wearer to step eighty *surindas* instead of forty, as with the instrument in popular use, I was soon again at a considerable elevation above the sea-level and nearly 200 *prastams* from 'Pike's Peak'. A little farther along the water courses began to flow to

the eastward. The flora and fauna had again altered in character, and now began to grow sparse; the soil was thin and arid, and in a week I found myself in a region absolutely destitute of organic life and without a vestige of soil. All was barren rock. The surface for hundreds of *prastams*, as I continued my advance, was nearly level, with a slight dip to the eastward. The rock was singularly striated, the scratches arranged concentrically and in helicoidal curves. This circumstance puzzled me and I resolved to take some more instrumental observations, bitterly regretting my improvidence in not availing myself of the Ahkoond's permission to bring with me such apparatus and assistants as would have given me knowledge vastly more copious and accurate than I could acquire with my simple pocket appliances.

I need not here go into the details of my observations with such instruments as I had, nor into the calculations of which these observations were the basic data. Suffice it that after two months' labor I reported the results to his Majesty in Sanf Rachisco in the words following:

Sire: It is my high privilege to apprise you of my arrival on the western slope of a mighty depression running through the center of the continent north and south, formerly known as the Mississippi Valley. It was once the seat of a thriving and prosperous population known as the Pukes, but is now a vast expanse of bare rock, from which every particle of soil and everything movable, including people, animals and vegetation, have been lifted by terrific cyclones and scattered afar, falling in other lands and at sea in the form of what was called meteoric dust! I find that these terrible phenomena began to occur about the year 1860, and lasted, with increasing frequency and power, through a century, culminating about the middle of that glacial period which saw the extinction of the Galoots and their neighboring tribes. There was, of course, a close connection between the two malefic phenomena, both, doubtless, being due to the same cause, which I have been unable to trace. A cyclone, I venture to remind your gracious Majesty, is a mighty whirlwind, accompanied by the most startling meteorological phenomena, such as electrical disturbances, floods of falling

water, darkness and so forth. It moves with great speed, sucking up everything and reducing it to powder. In many days' journey I have not found a square *copret* of the country that did not suffer a visitation. If any human being escaped he must speedily have perished from starvation. For some twenty centuries the Pukes have been an extinct race, and their country a desolation in which no living thing can dwell, unless, like me, it is supplied with Dr Blobob's Condensed Life-pills.

The Ahkoond replied that he was pleased to feel the most poignant grief for the fate of the unfortunate Pukes, and if I should by chance find the ancient king of the country I was to do my best to revive him with the patent resuscitator and present him the assurances of his Majesty's distinguished consideration; but as the politoscope showed that the nation had been a republic I gave myself no trouble in the matter.

My next report was made six months later and was in substance this:

Sire: I address your Majesty from a point 430 *coprets* vertically above the site of the famous ancient city of Buffalo, once the capital of a powerful nation called the Smugwumps. I can approach no nearer because of the hardness of the snow, which is very firmly packed. For hundreds of *prastams* in every direction, and for thousands to the north and west, the land is covered with this substance, which, as your Majesty is doubtless aware, is extremely cold to the touch, but by application of sufficient heat can be turned into water. It falls from the heavens, and is believed by the learned among your Majesty's subjects to have a sidereal origin.

The Smugwumps were a hardy and intelligent race, but they entertained the vain delusion that they could subdue Nature. Their year was divided into two seasons – summer and winter, the former warm, the latter cold. About the beginning of the nineteenth century according to my archethermograph, the summers began to grow shorter and hotter, the winters longer and colder. At every point in their country, and every day in the year, when they had not the

hottest weather ever known in that place, they had the coldest. When they were not dying by hundreds from sunstroke, they were dying by thousands from frost. But these heroic and devoted people struggled on, believing that they were becoming acclimated faster than the climate was becoming insupportable. Those called away on business were even afflicted with nostalgia, and with a fatal infatuation returned to grill or freeze, according to the season of their arrival. Finally there was no summer at all, though the last flash of heat slew several millions and set most of their cities afire, and winter reigned eternal.

The Smugwumps were now keenly sensible of the perils environing them, and, abandoning their homes, endeavored to reach their kindred, the Californians, on the western side of the continent in what is now your Majesty's ever-blessed realm. But it was too late: the snow growing deeper and deeper day by day, besieged them in their towns and dwellings, and they were unable to escape. The last one of them perished about the year 1943, and may God have mercy on his fool soul!

To this dispatch the Ahkoond replied that it was the royal opinion that the Smugwumps were served very well right. Some weeks later I reported thus:

Sire: The country which your Majesty's munificence is enabling your devoted servant to explore extends southward and southwestward from Smugwumpia many hundreds of *prastams*, its eastern and southern borders being the Wintry Sea and the Fiery Gulf, respectively. The population in ancient times was composed of Whites and Blacks in about equal numbers and of about equal moral worth – at least that is the record on the dial of my ethnograph when set for the twentieth century and given a southern exposure. The Whites were called Crackers and the Blacks known as Coons.

I find here none of the barrenness and desolation characterizing the land of the ancient Pukes, and the climate is not so rigorous and thrilling as that of the country of the late Smugwumps. It is, indeed, rather agreeable in point of

temperature, and the soil being fertile exceedingly, the whole land is covered with a dense and rank vegetation. I have yet to find a square *smig* of it that is open ground, or one that is not the lair of some savage beast, the haunt of some venomous reptile, or the roost of some offensive bird. Crackers and Coons alike are long extinct, and these are their successors.

Nothing could be more forbidding and unwholesome than these interminable jungles, with their horrible wealth of organic life in its most objectionable forms. By repeated observations with the necrohistoriograph I find that the inhabitants of this country, who had always been more or less dead, were wholly extirpated contemporaneously with the disastrous events which swept away the Galoots, the Pukes and the Smugwumps. The agency of their effacement was an endemic disorder known as yellow fever. The ravages of this frightful disease were of frequent recurrence, every point of the country being a center of infection; but in some seasons it was worse than in others. Once in every half century at first, and afterward every year* it broke out somewhere and swept over wide areas with such fatal effect that there were not enough of the living to plunder the dead; but at the first frost it would subside. During the ensuing two or three months of immunity the stupid survivors returned to the infected homes from which they had fled and were ready for the next outbreak. Emigration would have saved them all, but although the Californians (over whose happy and prosperous descendants your Majesty has the goodness to reign) invited them again and again to their beautiful land, where sickness and death were hardly known, they would not go, and by the year 1946 the last one of them, may it please your gracious Majesty, was dead and damned.

Having spoken this into the transmitter of the aerial isochronophone at the usual hour of 23 o'clock I applied the

*At one time it was foolishly believed that the disease had been eradicated by slapping the mosquitoes which were thought to produce it; but a few years later it broke out with greater violence than ever before, although the mosquitoes had left the country.

receiver to my ear, confidently expecting the customary commendation. Imagine my astonishment and dismay when my master's well-remembered voice was heard in utterance of the most awful imprecations on me and my work, followed by appalling threats against my life!

The Ahkoond had changed his dinner-time to five hours later and I had been speaking into the ears of an empty stomach!