

JASBO BROWN¹

BY DUBOSE HEYWARD

LOOSE, heady laughter shook the humid night.

Bells jangled shrilly, and a whistle flung

A note as lonely as a soul in flight,
To fail and die along a mile of river.

Then silence, while a presence moved among

The floating stars, and made them swirl
and quiver.

Clang! Clang!

A sudden world swam into view:

Dim windows banked in tiers against the dark,

And paddles threshing phosphorescent blue

Out of abysmal night. Tall funnels wreathing

The scene in blacker gloom from their dark breathing.

Twin eyes of red and green sought out the shore,

Found it, and centered on the sagging pier.

A sleepy Negro woke and raised a cheer.
A painter slapped the planks, and someone swore.

Out of the gloom the shoreline seemed to stir

And swim to greet the phantom visitor.

Ahoy! Stand-by!

Lithe, fluid shadows

massed

Upon the wharf; the gang-plank rattled down.

¹ According to tradition, jazz has taken its name from Jasbo Brown, an itinerant Negro player along the Mississippi, and later, in Chicago cabarets.

Faint lights came running from the river town.

A door banged open on the boat and cast
An orange glare across the crowded deck,
Gashing the screen of night, secretive,
vast,

And showing life, gregarious and teeming,
Bronze torsos under tatters, ridged and
gleaming,

Bandannaed heads, a banjo's round, blank face.

A woman's voice shrilled,

"Honey, I's come home!"

And, from the pier:

"Tenk Gawd, I's glad yer come!"

"I got er song,

You got er song,

All Gawd's chillen got er song!"

Up the plank they trooped, a hundred strong,

Throats belling in the warm, moist river air.

Hot laughter on the wharf; the flow and fusion

Of reds, and greens, and purples. Then a flare

Of ecstasy that unified confusion.

"Eberybody talk about Heaben ain't goin' dere—

Heaben, Heaben,

Goin' ter sing all ober Gawd's Heaben!"

From the high pilot-house a voice drawled down,

"Got all your niggers off?"

And from below,

"Aye, aye, sir. Let 'er go!"

The gang-plank rattled up against its spars.

The tide, with ponderous deliberation,
Swung out the boat and drew it down the
night
To lose it, like a fading constellation
Destined for the grave-yard of the stars.

II

Jasbo reeled slightly as he turned to face
The clustered lights that marked the river
town.

"Gawd, I's tired," he said, and then, far
down

Among the shacks:

"Heaben, Heaben!"

He raised his head, so, he was not alone.

The chorus throbbed in his deep baritone,

*"Goin' ter sing all ober Gawd's
Heaben!"*

But no one answered.

Yes, that was the way.

He ought to know by now, they'd make
him play

Out on the river clean from New Orleans.

But in the town, they'd drop him mighty
quick.

Churches were no place for muddy jeans.

He was not good enough for city ways,

And songs about their Jesus and His grace.

No, he was not—he knew it. When they
whined

Their mournful hymns, a trigger in his
mind

Would click, and he would yearn to shout
Queer broken measures that his soul flung
out

Of some recess where joy and agony

Whirled in a rhythm that he could feel
and see.

The river clucked and sobbed among the
piles.

A screech-owl launched a wavering ghost
of sound

That ranged and circled on the watery
miles,

And lived to shudder in the heavy air,

Causing the lonely man upon the pier

To turn and look behind him, while his
eyes

Widened and whitened.

"Gawd, it's lonely here!"

He drew a sleeve across his sweating brow.

"All Gawd's children got a song."

"I wonder now. . . ."

That girl in New Orleans who sent him
packing,

Because he had to stroke the ivories

To ease the smart

That always kept devouring his heart,

Instead of heaving cotton on the boat

And earning money for her, like the rest.

The sudden thought of her caught at his
throat,

Old fires seared him—set his temples throbb-
ing.

"Oh, Gawd, I got de blues!" he said, half
sobbing.

Then suddenly, he heard it down the shore.
A square of light leaped out, and through
the door

A tinny clamor smote the heavy night.

Someone sang drunkenly, and then a fight

Flamed up and died. The door went Bang!

Something inside of Jasbo broke—and sang.

They saw him sway against a shrunken
moon

That hung behind him in the narrow door.

Scarcely at all he seemed a human being,

Lips hanging loosely, and his eyes not see-
ing.

"My Gawd!" a woman called. "It's Jasbo
Brown.

Git off dat stool,

You empty-headed fool,

An' let him play what kin."

Somebody poured a gin—

Another—and another.

He gulped the liquid fire, scarcely knowing,

Lunged heavily, and slumped above the
keys.

Out of the night a little wind came blow-
ing—

A little wind, and searing memories.

"Oh, Gawd, I's lonely," he moaned once,

"But what's de use!"

Then crashed an aching chord, and sang,

"I got de blues!"

III

Oh, the hypocritical
Children of the Lord,
How he jeered and mocked them
In a snarling chord.

Women who had known him,
Who had passed him by,
Once again he loved them,
Spurned them, let them die.

Bosses that had cursed him
Over Christendom,
Whimpered as he flung them
Into Kingdom come.

Out of clinkered torment,
Like a rising steam,
Something whirled and glittered,
Waked him, let him dream;

Showed the world, a madness
Cured by ridicule;
Saved him as a prophet,
Damned him for a fool.

Fingers conjured music
From the ivories
Into swaying bodies,
Into flexing knees.

Black face, brown face,
In the smoky light,
Gin, and river women,
And the reeling night,

Whirled along a rhythm
Crashing in his blood;
Jasbo! ginned, and dreaming,
Stained with river mud.

IV

Dawn, and the music tinkled out and died.
"Jus' one more, Jaz. Here, take another
gin."
Two dancers dropped and sprawled,
A third stood watching with an empty
grin.

The door blew open, and the day smiled
in;

White-footed, down the river, it came
striding,

Beauty upon it, ancient, and abiding,
Breathing of April, and of jessamin.
The player rose and stumbled to the street.
Oh, for a place to rest, a hole for hiding.

She came and stood beside him in the
dew.

They watched the copper sun swing up
together.

"Honey," she said at last, "I'd die for you
Most any time you say, when you are
playin'."

"Yer likes my songs?" he asked. "Dat
what yer sayin'?"

The hunger in her eyes left little doubt.

"Come home wid me an' res'. Yer clean
wore out."

Down the littered street the player stum-
bled

With the girl beside him. Once she glanced
Up into his face, and found it tranced,
His eyes had lost her, and his loose lips
mumbled.

Presently, half-aloud, she heard him sing
A low-keyed, minor thing:

*Yer got ter know
I ain't de kind fer stayin';
Always I is movin',
Always playin'.*

*Life is jus' bello
An' so-long
Fer Gawd's lonely chillen
What got er song.*

*Take me home an' res' me
In de white folk's town,
But I got ter leabe yer
When de boat come down,*

*De boat an' de niggers
What love my song.
Life is jus' bello,
An' so-long.*

THE SHADOW MAKER

BY GEORGE STERLING

"MY BOY, the only important thing is to think clearly." The "implacable, beautiful" eyes turned their steely blue rapiers on me, and I sat awed and acquiescent. Today I am not so sure, believing as I do that the only important thing is to be happy, and that clear thinking is anything but conducive to that. However, Ambrose Bierce's pessimism was, like Twain's, of the sophomoric order, concerned with the immediate state of mankind, and innocent of the implications of infinity, not to mention those of relativity.

I cannot recall that I made any reply (probably I would not have hazarded one), and my only other memory of that, our first luncheon together, is that he told me a risqué story (the one ending in "They say she snores"). In my state of comparative innocence, I failed to get the point, and he explained it to me with amused condescension.

It seems strange to me, now, that I can recall no more of what was then to me so momentous an occasion, for indeed I feasted on the summit of Olympus, at the very feet of the god. For Bierce, during all but the earliest years of his life in California, was our Radamanthus of letters, from whose decisions there was no appeal. With a scratch of the pen he made or broke reputations, literary or otherwise, and his pathway through time was strewn with innumerable pretenders, pierced in their vainest spots.

One of the objections to that department of his many-sided work is that he gave too much of his energy to the breaking of butterflies on a wheel. But to Bierce

all mankind shared a common insignificance. A millionaire or king meant no more to him than a bricklayer. All names being destined, in his opinion, to eventual oblivion, their bearers signified nothing: what was important was the exercise of his wit and penetration, for the delectation of his readers. The practice had its dangers, of which he was well aware, and though his veins ran valorous blood, he was never without his big revolver, of which there was at least visual need on more than one occasion during his earlier days as editor of the *Wasp* and *News-Letter*. It was from those weeklies that he was graduated to the writing of his vitriolic "Prattle"—three or four columns on the editorial page of Mr. Hearst's San Francisco *Sunday Examiner*.

It was a long and acrimonious career. His pen drew blood from the majority of the men at whom it was pointed. He was from the start, fresh from the Civil War, a fierce propagandist, and much of his polemic was political in character. He feared (and spared) neither high nor low, and was invariably ready to assume full responsibility for all his statements. A fellow editor having become enraged at an attack in the *News-Letter*, and boasting of his intention to kill Bierce on sight, Bierce announced in the next issue that on a given day he would leave his office at a certain hour, proceed up a designated street on its right hand side, and participate in such hostilities as might be begun. The rival editor took a trip to Europe, and was absent for a year. Such was the local newspaper world of the seventies, gone with so much of San Francisco's old verve and color.

I have said that Bierce had been a sol-