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*Letter from a Dead Sailor*

*Transcribed by Ambrose Bierce*

It would be going too far, perhaps, to say that my last thoughts were of my country; when one is swimming about beneath a deck that is pressing him more and more deeply into the dark water one thinks rather more of how good a lungful of air would be than of higher themes. And of what value, anyhow, are last thoughts which are denied expression in last words? If Captain Lawrence had been shot in the mouth, so that he could not have said: "Don't give up the ship!" he might just as profitably have died thinking faithfully of his sweethearts and wives in the several ports that he had visited or of his chances of promotion in the new service that he was about to enter. No, it really cannot make much difference what are the thoughts of a sailor drowning like a rat in a hole. Still, I am persuaded that some of my shipmates thought of our country the last thing, for I now recollect hearing one of them say, after the explosion and before the water broke in: "The blackguards will have to pay for this!" So he must have been thinking of somebody or something that would enforce payment. I don't believe, though, it was a money payment that he had in mind; that kind of thing, if the matter is rightly understood here, was invented in the State Department in Washington. Well, it begins to look as if my shipmate were not much of a prophet, anyhow.

A letter from a dead sailor should not, I think, concern itself too much with advice to living landsmen; before leaving Havana for This Place I used to hold that the dead had altogether too much to say in mundane affairs, and I'm of that opinion still. Nevertheless, I cannot help feeling that in the negotiations between Washington and Madrid we poor devils that went down in the "Maine" have not been accorded the standing that we were justly entitled to. It did at one time, and for a long time too, seem as if the lively public interest in us would force us into diplomatic consideration, but that has proved a fallacious hope; through it all we have been treated as "incidental"—may the devil fly away with the lubber that invented the word! Even when it was shown beyond the possibility of honest doubt that we were foully and treacherously murdered, the president did not find it in his heart to make a suggestion about it, and the Spanish premier, respecting his reticence, was as silent as he. Silence in the presence of the dead!—what would be more becoming? Yet some of the more liberal of us could have forgiven the commander-in-chief of the Navy if he had made a good deal of noise about us, damn his eyes!

It is said here that money is being collected to erect a monument to our memory. We are given to understand that our fate is universally deplored, and our patriotic virtues celebrated with fervor and a great acclaim. For all this we are duly and truly grateful in our quiet, undemonstrative way. We are said to have died for our country. As to that, I have some remarks to make. If our death was a mere "incident for separate consideration"—a phenomenon unrelated to the broad question of Spanish sovereignty in Cuba—all the monuments that can be set up will

not show that we performed an important service to the country' all the eulogium that is possible to tongue or pen will not dignify our death above that of sailors perishing on a lee shore in a gale of wind. In the simultaneous drowning of two hundred and sixty men there is much to startle and something to grieve, but nothing to glorify the victims. Dynamite and gun cotton do not consecrate. Assassination does not canonize. There is but one way by which our living countrymen can distinguish us: our death can be made memorable and glorious only by avenging it. If war must be, let our assassination be frankly declared one of the reasons for making it—one of the causes from which flowed as a consequence the freedom of Cuba, the end of Spanish dominion in the Western Hemisphere. Then it can truly be said that in dying we performed a signal and inestimable service to the cause of human liberty, to our country, to the world. So, and so only, can we be honored as you say that we merit; and to that distinction we aspire. Withhold it—make our awful fate “an incident for separate consideration”—and History, following your example, will deny to us any part in the memorable struggle about to begin. What then will become of our “monument?” Another generation will see its stones, inscribed with our forgotten names, built into the walls of a potato patch.

AN ABLE-SOULED SEAMAN

HERE, April 2, 1898