

Artemus Ward

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Charles Farrar Browne, known to the world as Artemus Ward, was born ninety years ago in Waterford, Maine. He died at an age when most of us are only beginning to mature – thirty-three. Little more can be told of him by way of formal biography. Mr. Don C. Seitz lately employed himself upon a labour of love by seeking out and publishing all that is known, probably, of the externalities of Ward's life. Mr. Seitz has made the most of what was put before him, and in so doing he has done good service to the history of American letters; yet one closes his fine volume with a keen sense of how little he had to do with, a sense of the slightness and insignificance of his material. All Ward's years were *Wanderjahre*; he had no schooling, he left a poor rural home at sixteen to work in neighbouring printing-offices; he tramped West and South as a compositor and reporter; he wrote a little, lectured a little, gathered up odds and ends of his writings and dumped them in a woeful mess upon the desk of Carleton, the publisher, to be brought out in two or three slender volumes; he went to New York, then to London, saw as much of collective human life in those centres as he had energy to contemplate; he wrote a few pages for the old *Vanity Fair* and for *Punch*, gave a few lectures in Dodworth Hall on Broadway and Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly; and then he died. Little enough of the *pars magna fui* is to be found here for the encouragement of a biographer; Mr. Seitz, I repeat, is to be congratulated on his intrepidity. It is surely a remarkable thing that one whose experience was limited by the span of thirty-three years, whose literary output was correspondingly scanty, and whose predicable hold upon the future was as slight and hazardous as Mr. Seitz shows Ward's to have been, should have managed to live nearly a century; and it is perhaps more remarkable that he should have done it in a civilization like ours, which is not over-careful with literary reputations and indeed does not concern itself deeply with spiritual achievement or spiritual activity of any kind.

Yet that is what Artemus Ward has somehow managed to do, and Mr. Seitz is on hand with a bibliography of eighteen pages, closely printed in small type, to prove it. Some measure of proof, too, is probably to be found in the fact that a new issue of Ward's complete works came out in London two years ago, and that an American firm has taken thought to publish this present volume. How, then, has Ward contrived to live so long? As a mere fun-maker, it is highly improbable that he could have done it. Ward is officially listed as the first of the great American humorists; Mr. Albert Payson Terhune even commemorates him as the man "who taught Americans to laugh." This is great praise; and one gladly acknowledges that the humorists perform an immense public service and deserve the most handsome public recognition of its value. In the case of Ward, it is all to Mr. Terhune's credit that he perceives this. Yet as one reads Ward's own writings, one is reminded that time's processes of sifting and shaking-down are inexorable, and one is led to wonder whether, after all, in the quality of sheer humorist, Artemus Ward can quite account for his own persistent longevity. In point of the power sheerly to provoke laughter, the power sheerly to amuse, distract and entertain, one doubts that Ward can be said so far to transcend his predecessors, Shillaber and Derby. In point of wit and homely wisdom, of the insight and shrewdness which give substance and momentum to fun-making, it would seem that Ward's contemporary, Henry W. Shaw, perfectly stands comparison with him. The disparity, at all events, is by no means so obvious as to enable one to say surely that the law of the survival of the fittest must take its course in Ward's favour. One is therefore led to suspect either that Ward's longevity is due to some quality which he possessed apart from his quality as humorist, some quality which has not yet, perhaps, been singled out and remarked with sufficient definiteness, or else that it is due to the blind play of chance.

Several considerations tell against the hypothesis of accident. It might be enough to say flatly that such accidents do not happen, that the passing stream of printed matter is too full and swift to permit any literary flotsam to escape being caught and swept on to oblivion by its searching current. Two other considerations, however, may be remarked as significant. First, that

Ward very soon passed over – almost immediately passed over, the transition beginning even in the last few months of his life – passed over from being a popular property to become a special property of the intelligent and civilized minority; and he has remained their special property ever since. In his quality of humorist he could hardly have done this. Even had he really been the man who taught the Americans to laugh, disinterested gratitude could hardly be carried so far. Artemus Ward himself declined to weep over the memory of Cotton Mather, saying simply that “he’s bin ded too lengthy”; and such, more or less, are we all, even the intelligent and civilized among us. Ward was, in his time, a popular property in virtue of his singularly engaging personality, his fine and delicate art as a public speaker and his brilliant dealing with questions and affairs of current interest. But his presence is no longer among us, and the affairs of profoundest public interest in his day are hardly as much as a memory in ours. No power of humour in dealing with those affairs could serve to continue him as a cherished property of the intelligent, any more than it could serve to restore him as a popular property now that those affairs, and the interest that they evoked, have disappeared. His continuance must be accounted for by another quality than those which he shared with his predecessors and contemporaries who have not taken on a like longevity.

The second consideration is that Ward has always been the object of a different and deeper regard in England, where his humour is alien, than in America where it is native. It has long been difficult to get a copy of his complete works in this country, even at second hand; the last edition was published by Dillingham in 1898. In London one buys them over the counter, and I think one has always been able to do so. Since the Dillingham edition, Ward has been kept alive in America chiefly in edited issues like Mr. Clifton Johnson’s, of 1912, and this present volume; and also in anthologies and in essays by many hands. These have, however, I think invariably, presented him as a humorist, and without taking account of the quality which has given his work the vitality that it seems to possess. The English writers have done, on the whole, rather better; but even they did not strike straight through to this quality, disengage it from those that made up his

strictly professional character, and hold it out in clear view; though there is evidence that they themselves had glimpses of it. They were for the most part content, like Ward's own countrymen, to accept him as a humorist and to assume that he kept his place in literature on the strength of his humour; and they were not aware, apparently, that this assumption left them with a considerable problem on their hands. Mr. Seitz quotes Ward's own view of the quality that gives power and permanence to his work – I too shall quote it presently, as it is admirably explicit – and oddly enough, without perceiving that it leaves him with a considerable problem on his hands; a problem which, if he had attended to it, might have caused him to change the direction of about three-fourths of his book.

No, clearly it is not by the power of his humour that Ward has earned his way in the world of letters, but by the power of his criticism. Ward was a first-class critic of society; and he has lived for a century by precisely the same power that gave a more robust longevity to Cervantes and Rabelais. He is no Rabelais or Cervantes, doubtless; no one would pretend that he is; but he is eminently of their glorious company. Certainly Keats was no Shakespeare, but as Matthew Arnold excellently said of him, he is with Shakespeare; to his own degree he lives by grace of a classic quality which he shares with Shakespeare; and so also is Ward with Rabelais and Cervantes by grace of his power of criticism.

Let us look into this a little, for the sake of making clear the purpose for which this book is issued. I have already said that Ward has become a special property, and that he can never again be a popular property, at least until the coming of that millennial time when most of our present dreams of human perfectability are realized. I have no wish to discourage my publishers, but in fairness I have had to remind them that this delectable day seems still, for one reason or another, to be quite a long way off, and that meanwhile they should not put any very extravagant expectations upon the sale of this volume, but content themselves as best they may with the consciousness that they are serving a vital interest, really the ultimate interest, of the saving Remnant. Ward is the property of an order of persons – for order is the proper word, rather than class or group, since they are found

quite unassociated in any formal way, living singly or nearly so, and more or less as aliens, in all classes of our society – an order which I have characterized by using the term *intelligence*. If I may substitute the German word *Intelligenz*, it will be seen at once that I have no idea of drawing any supercilious discrimination as between, say, the clever and the stupid, or the educated and the uneducated. *Intelligenz* is the power invariably, in Plato's phrase, to see things as they are, to survey them and one's own relations to them with objective disinterestedness, and to apply one's consciousness to them simply and directly, letting it take its own way over them uncharted by prepossession, unchanneled by prejudice, and above all uncontrolled by routine and formula. Those who have this power are everywhere; everywhere they are not so much resisting as quietly eluding and disregarding all social pressure which tends to mechanize their processes of observation and thought. Rabelais's first words are words of jovial address, under a ribald figure, to just this order of persons to which he knew he would forever belong, an order characterized by *Intelligenz*; and it is to just this order that Ward belongs.

The critical function which spirits like Ward perform upon this unorganized and alien order of humanity is twofold; it is not only clearing and illuminating, but it is also strengthening, reassuring, even healing and consoling. They have not only the ability but the temper which marks the true critic of the first order; for, as we all know, the failure which deforms and weakens so much of the able second-rate critic's work is a failure in temper. Take, for example, by way of a comparative study in social criticism, Rabelais's description of the behaviour of Diogenes at the outbreak of the Corinthian War, and put beside it any piece of anti-militarist literature that you may choose; put beside it the very best that M. Rolland or Mr. Norman Angell or even Count Tolstoy himself can do. How different the effect upon the spirit! Or again, consider in the following pages the pictures which Ward draws of the village of Baldwinsville under stress of the Civil War. Not one item is missing of all that afflicted the person of *Intelligenz* in every community at some time in the last ten years. Ward puts his finger as firmly as Mr. Bertrand Russell and Mr. H. L. Mencken have put theirs, upon all the

meanness, low-mindedness, greed, viciousness, bloodthirstiness and homicidal mania that were rife among us – and upon their exciting causes as well – but the person of *Intelligenz* turns to him, and instead of being further depressed, as Mr. Russell and Mr. Mencken depress him, instead of being further overpowered by a sense that the burdens put upon the spirit of man are greater than it can bear, he is lifted out of his temporary despondency and enervation by a sight of the long stretch of victorious humanity that so immeasurably transcends all these matters of the moment. Such is the calming and persuasive influence of the true critical temper, that one immediately perceives Ward to be regarding all the untowardness of Baldwinsville *sub specie aeternitatis*, and one gratefully submits to his guidance towards a like view of one's own circumstances.

The essential humanity of Abraham Lincoln may be largely determined in one's own mind, I think, by the fact that he made just this use of Artemus Ward. Mr. Seitz tells us how, in the darkest days of the Civil War, Lincoln read the draft of his Emancipation Proclamation at a special meeting of his Cabinet, and, to the immense scandal and disgust of his associates, prefaced it by reading several pages from Ward. The incident is worth attention for the further establishment of the distinction drawn among men by the quality of *Intelligenz*. Seward, Chase, Stanton, Blair, had ability, they had education; but they had not the free, disinterested play of consciousness upon their environment, they did not instinctively tend to see things as they are, they thought largely by routine and formula, they were pedantic, *unintelligent* – that is precisely the word that Goethe, the greatest of critics, would have applied to them at once. Upon them then, naturally, Lincoln's performance made the impression of mere impudent levity; and thus one is directly led to see great force in Ward's sly suggestion that Lincoln should fill up his Cabinet with showmen! Alas! how often the civilized spirit is moved to wish that the direction of public affairs might be taken out of the hands of those who in their modesty are fond of calling themselves "practical" men, and given over to the artists, to those who at least have some theoretical conception of a satisfying technique of living, even though actually they may have gone no great way in the mastery of its practice.

In another place Mr. Seitz tells us how the great and good John Bright, the Moses of British political liberalism, attended one of Ward's lectures in London, sat gravely through it, and then observed that "its information was meagre, and presented in a desultory, disconnected manner"! The moment I read that, I laid down the book, saying to myself, *Behold the reason for liberalism's colossal failure!* The primary failure of liberalism is just the failure in *Intelligenz* that we see so amusingly indicated in the case of Mr. Bright; its secondary failure, as we saw in the case of the late Mr. Wilson, for example, is a failure in the high and sound character that depends so largely upon *Intelligenz* for its development. Can one imagine that Ward would be more intelligible to representative British liberals since Bright's day, or that he would make a more serious and salutary impression upon the energumens who in this country are busily galvanizing some of Mr. Wilson's political formulas into a ghastly simulacrum of life, and setting them up as the soul and essence of liberalism – upon ex-Justice Clarke, for example, or ex-Secretary Baker or Mr. George Foster Peabody? One smiles at the thought of it.

Ward said of writers like himself that "they have always done the most toward helping virtue on its pilgrimage, and the truth has found more aid from them than from all the grave polemicists and solid writers that have ever spoken or written. . . They have helped the truth along *without encumbering it with themselves.*" I venture to italicize these remarkable words. How many good causes there are, to be sure, that seem hopelessly condemned and nullified by the personality of those who profess them! One can think of any number of reforms, both social and political, that one might willingly accept if only one need not accept their advocates too. Bigotry, arrogance, intolerance, self-assurance, never ran higher over public affairs than in Ward's day, yet he succeeded in putting upon all public questions the precise critical estimate that one puts upon them now in the perspective of fifty years; its correspondence with the verdict of history is extraordinarily complete. It would be nothing remarkable if one should arrive now at a correct critical estimate of the Negro question, for example, or of the policy of abolition, or of the character and qualities of public men of the day, or of the stock

phrases, the catchwords and claptrap that happened for the time being to be the stock-in-trade of demagoguery; but it is highly remarkable that a contemporary should have had a correct critical estimate of them, and that he should have given to it an expression so strong and so consistent, and yet so little encumbered with himself as to be wholly acceptable.

Really, there are very few of the characteristic and distinctive qualities of American life that Ward's critical power left untouched. I read somewhere lately – I think in one of Professor Stuart P. Sherman's deliverances, though I am not quite sure – that Americans are just now very much in the mood of self-examination, and that their serious reading of novelists like Mr. Sinclair Lewis or Mr. Sherwood Anderson, and of essayists like Mr. Ludwig Lewisohn or Mr. Mencken, is proof that they are in that mood. I have great doubts of all this; yet if it be true, I can but the more strongly urge them to re-examine the work of a first-rate critic, who fifty years ago drew a picture of our civilization that in all essential aspects is still accurate. Ward represents the ideal of this civilization as falling in with one only of the several instincts that urge men onward in the quest of perfection, the instinct of expansion. The claim of expansion is abundantly satisfied by Ward's America; the civilization about him is cordial to the instinct of expansion, fosters it, and makes little of the obligation to scrupulousness or delicacy in its exercise. Ward takes due pride in relating himself properly to the predominance of this instinct; he says that by strict attention to business he has "amarsed a handsom Pittance," and that when he has enough to permit him to be pious in good style, like his wealthy neighbours, he intends to join the Baldwinsville church. There is an ideal of civilized life for you, a conception of the progressive humanization of man in society! For the claim of instincts other than the instinct of expansion, Ward's America does nothing. It does nothing for the claim of intellect and knowledge (aside from purely instrumental knowledge) nothing for the claim of beauty and poetry, the claim of morals and religion, the claim of social life and manners.

Our modern school of social critics might therefore conceivably get profit out of studying Ward's view of American life, to see how regularly he represents it, as they do, as manifesting an extremely low type of beauty, a facti-

tious type of morals, a grotesque and repulsive type of religion, a profoundly imperfect type of social life and manners. Baldwinsville is overspread with all the hideousness, the appalling tedium and enervation that afflict the sensitive soul of Mr. Sinclair Lewis. The young showman's courtship of Betsy Jane Peasley exhausts its resources of romance and poetry; its *beau ideal* of domesticity is completely fulfilled in their subsequent life together – a life fruitful indeed in certain wholesome satisfactions, but by no means such as a “well-formed mind would be disposed to relish.” On the side of intellect and knowledge, Baldwinsville supports the editor of the *Bugle* as contentedly as New York supports Mr. Ochs and Mr. Munsey, and to quite as good purpose; it listens to the school-master's views on public questions as uncritically as New York listens to Mr. Nicholas Murray Butler's, and to quite as good purpose. Baldwinsville's dominant type of morals is as straitly legalistic, formal and superficial as our own; its dominant type of religion is easily recognizable as the hard, dogged, unintelligent fanaticism with which Zenith confronted Mr. Sinclair Lewis. We easily recognize the “dissidence of Dissent and the protestantism of the Protestant religion”; which now inspires the Anti-Saloon League, and which informs and animates the gentle ministrations of the Ku Klux Klan.

Thus Ward, in his own excellent phrase, powerfully helps along the truth about civilization in the United States; and all the more powerfully in that, unlike Mr. Lewis and Mr. Mencken, he does not so encumber it with himself, so overload it with the dragging weight of his own propensities, exasperations, repugnances, that his criticism, however accurate and interesting, is repellant and in the long run ineffectual. Often, indeed, his most searching criticism is made by indirection, by the turn of some phrase that at first strikes one as quite insignificant, or at least as quite irrelevant to any critical purpose; yet when this phrase once enters the mind it becomes pervasive, and one finds presently that it has coloured all one's cast of thought – and this is an effect which only criticism of the very first order can produce. For instance, consider the first sentence that he writes in a letter to his wife from the Athens of America:

Dear Betsy: I write you this from Boston, 'the Modern Atkins' as it is denomyunated, altho I skurcely know what those air.

Nothing but that. Yet somehow when that little piece of exquisite raillery sinks in, it at once begins to put one into just the frame of mind and temper to meet properly the gentle, self-contained provincialism at which it was directed. Let the reader experiment for himself. Let him first recall the fearfully hard sledding he had on his way through, say, Mr. Barrett Wendell's *History of American Literature*, or the recent volume of Mrs. Field's reminiscences; let him remember the groan of distress that now and then escaped him while reading Mr. Howells's really excellent novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Then with this sentence in mind, let him try reading any one of the three books again, and see how differently it will impress him.

After the same fashion one may make quite good headway with Mr. Villard's biography of John Brown if one's spirit is cleared and steadied by Ward's inimitable critique of "Ossawatomie Brown, or, the Hero of Harper's Ferry." Amidst the squalor of our popular plays and popular literature, one preserves a decent equanimity by perusing Ward's reviews of East Side theatricals and of Forrest's "Othello," and his parodies of the cheap and lurid romances of his day. Our popular magazines take on a less repellant aspect when one remembers how, after three drinks of New England rum, Ward "knockt a small boy down, pickt his pocket of a New York *Ledger*, and wildly commenced readin Sylvanus Kobb's last Tail." No better criticism of our ludicrous and distressing perversion of the religious instinct can be found than in his account of his visit to the Shakers, the Free Lovers and the Spiritualists. Never was the depth and quality of routine patriotism more accurately measured than by this, from the account of his visit to Richmond after the surrender:

I met a man today – I am not at liberty to tell his name, but he is an old and infloential citizen of Richmond, and sez he, "Why! weve bin fightin agin the Old Flag! Lor bless me, how sing'lar!" He then borrer'd five dollars of me and bust into a flood of tears.

Again, how effective is Ward's criticism of the mischievous and chlorotic sentimentalism to which Americans seem invariably to give their first al-

legiance! During the Civil War the popular regard for motherhood was exploited as viciously as during the last war, or probably in all wars, and Ward's occasional reflections upon this peculiarly contemptible routine-process of militarism are more effective than any indignant fulminations of outraged common sense; as when he suggests, for instance, that "the song writers air doin' the Mother business rayther too muchly," or as when in another place he remarks that it seems about time somebody began to be a little sorry for the old man. He touches another fond topic of sentimentalism in his story, which I must quote, of leaving home as a boy to embark in the show business. Where can better criticism than this be found?

You know, Betsy, that when I first commenced my career as a moral exhibitor with a six-legged cat and a Bass drum, I was only a simple peasant child – skurce 15 summers had flow'd over my yoothful hed. But I had sum mind of my own. My father understood this. 'Go,' he said, 'Go, my son, and hog the public!' (he ment 'knock em,' but the old man was allus a little given to slang). He put his withered han' tremblingly onto my hed, and went sadly into the house. I thought I saw tears tricklin down his venerable chin, but it might hav' been tobacker juice. He chaw'd.

But I must end these illustrations, which I have been tempted perhaps unduly to multiply and enlarge upon because their author has never yet, as far as I am aware, been brought to the attention of modern readers in the one capacity wherein he appears to me to maintain an open communication with the future – the capacity of critic. In conclusion I cannot forbear remarking the spring, the abounding vitality and gusto, that pervades Ward's work, and pointing out that here too he is with Rabelais and Cervantes. The true critic is aware, with George Sand, that for life to be fruitful, life must be felt as a joy; that it is by the bond of joy, not of happiness or pleasure, not of duty or responsibility, that the called and chosen spirits are kept together in this world. There was little enough of joy going in the society that surrounded Ward; the sky over his head was of iron and brass; and there is even perhaps less joy current in American society now. But the true critic has his resources of joy within himself, and the motion of his joy is self-sprung. There may be ever so little hope of the human race, but that is the moralist's affair, not the critic's. The true critic takes no account of

optimism or pessimism; they are both quite outside his purview, his affair is one only of joyful appraisal, assessment and representation.

Epitaphs are notably exuberant, but the simple line carved upon Ward's tombstone presents with a most felicitous precision and completeness, I think, the final word upon him. "His name will live as a sweet and unfading recollection." Yes, just that is his fate, and there is none other so desirable. *Mansueti possidebunt terram*, said the Psalmist, the *amiable* shall possess the earth; and so, in the long run, they do. Insight and wisdom, shrewdness and penetration – for a critic these are great gifts, indispensable gifts, and the public has regard for their exercise, it gives gratitude for the benefits that they confer; but they are not enough of themselves to invest a critic's name with the quality of a sweet and unfading recollection. To do this they must communicate themselves through the medium of a temper, a prepossessing and persuasive amiability. Wordsworth showed himself a great critic when he said of his own poems that "they will co-operate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, and will in their degree be efficacious in making men wiser, better and happier"; and it is just because of their unvarying co-operation with the benign tendencies in human nature and society that Ward's writings have made him in the deepest sense a possession, a cherished and ennobling possession, of those who know him.