


OUR BIOGRAPHICAL BUREAU.

"Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And departing, leave behind us
Foot-prints on the sands of time."

Artemus Ward.

[FROM A SKETCH BY REV. H. R. HAWES, IN GOOD WORDS]

 CHARLES Farrer Browne (alias Artemus Ward) was born at Watford, Maine, in 1836. He began his life as a type-setter, then took to newspaper reporting, and so on (like Dickens) made a mark with jokes, which went the round of the papers. The circus presently caught up the new vein of wit. Artemus was always fond of the circus; but he did not care to sit and applaud his own jokes; he thought he might contrive to get the applause and the cash himself. A lecture to be constructed on peculiar principles, flashed across his mind. Was not the public worn out with dry lectures? Had not the time of protest arrived? What very excellent fooling it would be to expose the dull imposters who passed up and down the land, boring mechanics' institutes and lyceums with their pretentious twaddle, and bringing art and science into disrepute! Artemus Ward felt that the man and the hour had arrived. He would bring about a mighty reaction in the public taste; under these circumstances he conceived the appalling notion of constructing a lecture which should contain the smallest possible amount of information with the greatest quantity of fun. It was to consist mainly of a series of incoherent and irrelevant observations, strung like a row of mixed beads upon the golden thread of his wit.

Ward started in California with the announcement that he would lecture on "The Babes in the Wood." He said he preferred this title to that of "My Seven Grandmothers." Why, nobody knows, for there was, of course, to be as little in the lecture about babes, in or out of the wood, as about seven or any other number of grandmothers. "The babes in the Wood" was never written down; a few sentences only have survived of a performance which was destined to revolutionize the coming lecturing of the age.

The "Babes" seem only to have been alluded to twice—first at the beginning when the lecturer gravely announced "The Babes" as his subject, and then, after a rambling string of irrelevant witticisms, which lasted from an hour to an hour and a-half, he concluded with, "I now come to my subject—'The Babes in the Wood.'" Then taking out his watch, his countenance would suddenly change—surprise followed by great perplexity! At last, recovering his former composure, and facing the difficulty as best he could, he continued: "But I find I have exceeded my time, and will therefore merely remark that, so far as I know, they were very good babes; they were as good as ordinary babes." Then, almost breaking down, and much more nervously, "I really have no time to go into their history; you will find it all in your story-books. Then, getting quite dreamy, "They died in the woods, listening to the woodpecker tapping at the hollow beech-tree." With some suppressed emotion, "It was a sad fate for them, and I pity them; so I hope do you. Good-night!"

The success of this lecture throughout California was instantaneous and decisive. The reporters complained that they could not write for laughing, and split their pencils desperately in attempts to take down the jokes. Every hall and theatre was crowded to hear about the "Babes," and the "lyceum" lecturer of the period, "what crammed himself full of high soundin' phrases, and got trusted for a soot of black clothes," had nothing to do but to go home and destroy himself.

Artemus was an insatiable rover. At one time, being laid up, he read Layard's "Nineveh." The Bulls excited his fancy; the Arabs and the wildness of the scenes, the ignorance, stupidity, and knavery of the natives, the intelligence and enthusiasm of the explorer, the marvellous unlooked-for results—all this suited him. He must go to Nineveh and have a look and come back and speak a piece. Alas! cut short at the early age of thirty, how many "pieces" had to remain unspoken, and a trip to Nineveh amongst them!

Passing from San Francisco to Salt Lake City, Ward becomes his own raconteur. Of course he lectured by the way, and his progress was slow and roundabout, like that of the ant who, in order to cross the street, chose to go over the top of Strasburg Cathedral. But the longer the journey the greater the gain to those who are anxious to surprise gleams of his quaint nature, or flashes of his wit, humor, and adventure.

In California his lecture theatres were more varied than convenient. Now he stood behind a drinking bar, once in a prison, the cells being filled with a mixed audience and Artemus standing at the end of a long passage into which they all opened, then in a billiard-room, or in the open air. On one occasion the money being taken in a hat, the crown fell out and spilt the dollars. Ward said he never could be quite sure how many dollars were taken that night; no one seemed to know.

All who knew Ward knew there was much truth in his saying, "I really don't care for money." He was the most genial, generous, free-handed of men, and, like other kindly souls, his good-nature was often imposed upon by unprincipled and heartless adventurers, who ate his dinners, and laughed at his jokes, and spent his money. Had it not been for Hingston, his faithful agent, he would have fared far worse, for Ward was not a man of business.

If his anecdotes by the way are not all strictly authentic, they are far too good to be lost. He tells us how he visited most of the mountain towns and found theatres occasionally, to which he invariably repaired. One was a Chinese theatre; when he offered his money to the Chinaman at the door that official observed, "Ki hi hi ki shoolah!" "I tell him," says Ward, "that on the whole I think he is right." On entering one he finds the play is going to last six weeks; he leaves early. It is in this rough mountainous region that some of Ward's best jokes were manufactured. To this period belongs the famous man who owed him two hundred dollars and never paid him.

"A gentleman, a friend of mine, came to me one day with tears in his eyes; I said: 'Why these weeps?' He said he had a mortgage on his farm and wanted to borrow two hundred dollars. I lent him the money and he went away. Some time after he returned with more tears. He said he must leave me forever; I ventured to remind him of the two hundred dollars. He was much cut up; I thought I would not be hard upon him, so I told him I would throw off one hundred dollars. He brightened up, wrung my hand with emotion. 'Mr. Ward,' he exclaimed, 'generous man! I won't allow you to outdo me in liberality, I'll throw off the other hundred.'"

But the Salt Lake had to be reached, and a wild and to some extent perilous journey it was.

In the greatest trepidation Artemus at length beheld the trim buildings of the Mormons shining in the distance, and entering the spacious thoroughfares studded with gardens, and lively with a very mixed, active, and always industrious population, sought out with Hingston a retired inn and gave himself up to his own reflections.

They were not pleasant. He certainly meant to see Salt Lake and the Mormons, and there he was. But in his book he had been unsparing in his sarcasms on the Mormons, Brigham and all his works, and if there was one thing he felt quite certain of, it was that he was now in the absolute power of the most unscrupulous man of America, whom he happened to have grossly insulted. Hingston advised him not to venture abroad rashly, and went out himself to see which way the wind blew. Artemus sat smoking moodily at home expecting, as he says, "to have his swan-like throat cut by the Danites."

At last enters a genial Mormon Elder, who assures him of the general good-will of the Mormons, but also pulls out a book ("Artemus his book!") and reads to its author a passage which he admits to have somewhat hurt their feelings; and certainly it is a little strong, as coming from a man who had never been in Salt Lake City or seen the people. This is the passage and it occurs in the Showman's papers:

"I girded up my lions and fled the scene; I packed up my duds and left Salt Lake, which is a second Sodom of Gomorrah, inhabited by as thievish, and unprincipled a set of retches as ever drew breath in any spot on the globe."