

ARTEMUS WARD, MARK TWAIN
AND THE LIMBURGER CHEESE

JAMES C. AUSTIN

In "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion," 1882, Mark Twain told a story which he entitled "The Invalid's Story." In one of his comic lectures between 1861 and 1866, Artemus Ward told a similar story that was evidently the "germ" of Twain's. Artemus' story is retold by James F. Ryder in Voigtlander and I (Cleveland, 1902):

In a small village where there was no undertaker, a death had occurred and a coffin was wanted, and one of the citizens who was going to town was entrusted to secure one. This man was extremely fond of limburger cheese and could not resist purchasing a few pounds. The sample he got was very talented, in a way, and he did not wish to carry it about with him, so he went to the express office to ship it home. But the agent declined to receive it, on the ground of its being "too loud." A happy thought struck him and he hied away to the undertaker's shop and, with his prize well wrapped in repeated papers, put it in the coffin to be sent to the train for the first run west. Before taking his seat in the coach to return home he looked into the baggage car and found "it" was on board. Before reaching the home station he sauntered into the baggage car, found the baggage master with his head sticking out of the side door and the casket placed by the open back door of the car. He looked at it in an interested way, and was turning to walk back when the "trunk smasher" asked him: "Does that belong to you?" "Yes," said the passenger. "Any relation?" asked the baggage man. "Wife," was the response. "Well," said the smasher, with head reached well out, "she ain't in no trance!"

Ryder is not explicit about the date at which he heard the story. Professor John Q. Reed, who has made a study of Artemus's first lecture season, reports that the limburger cheese anecdote is not to be found in the newspaper versions of the lecture delivered during that season, 1861-1862; and it was certainly not a part of the humorist's last great performance, "Artemus

Ward among the Mormons," presented with a panorama from 1864 to 1867. This places it between 1862 and 1864. And it is quite possible that it was part of the "Babes in the Wood" lecture that Mark Twain heard in Virginia City, Nevada, in December, 1863.¹ The lecture impressed Twain so much that he began to think of lecturing himself, using Artemus's techniques as his model.

The difference between Mark's version and Artemus' illustrates brilliantly the difference between the Southwestern yarn and the Yankee anecdote, and it also shows Twain's manner of developing a story.

Charles Farrar Browne, the creator of Artemus Ward, was an upstate New Englander by birth, and achieved fame in the transplanted New England community of Cleveland, Ohio. It can be demonstrated that his humor consists almost exclusively of Yankee wit. His version of the story was but a casual part of his rambling lecture, but it represents what I will call the Yankee anecdote. It is straight narrative except for the dialog of the climax. The necessary "facts" are related as quickly as possible so as to get to the punch line. The point consists of understatement.

Twain's "The Invalid's Story" is much more fully developed, and represents what I would call the Southwestern yarn (though, interestingly enough, the setting is near Cleveland in this version). It is much longer--some 2,600 words long. Twain makes the passenger and the baggage man fellow sufferers in a tight baggage car containing what they both take to be the coffin with the body inside. Details are thus added to the plot, names and places are explicit, and there is much more dialog. The description of the smell and its effects is lurid. To overpower the smell, a fire was made of "a lot of chicken feathers, and dried apples, and leaf tobacco, and rags, and old shoes, and sulphur, and asafetida, and one thing or another."

When they got well started, I couldn't see, myself, how even the corpse could stand it. All that went before was just simply poetry to that smell--but mind you, the original smell stood up out of it just as sublime as ever--fact is, these other smells just seemed to give it a better hold; and my, how rich it was! I didn't make these reflections there--there wasn't time--made them on the platform.

Artemus's story is quite genteel in comparison. But the outstanding difference between the two versions is that Mark makes Artemus' punch line a minor detail of the story and builds his yarn on exaggeration. "The Invalid's Story" ends:

We were taken from the platform an hour later, frozen and insensible, at the next station, and I went straight off into a virulent fever, and never knew anything again for three weeks. I found out, then, that I had spent that awful night with a harmless box of rifles

[mistaken for the coffin] and a lot of innocent cheese; but the news was too late to save me; imagination had done its work, and my health was permanently shattered; neither Bermuda nor any other land can ever bring it back to me. This is my last trip; I am on my way home to die.

In addition to these changes Mark, the artist, put the story in the first person--particularly appropriate for the yarn. And he made real characters of both the passenger--narrator--and the baggage man.

Aside from the joke involved, both Artemus and Mark were mocking current sentimentality about death. It is related that Artemus told his story lugubriously after a fit of coughing that supposedly required a chair to be brought onto the stage so that he could rest. His story is but a flash of wit compared to the grotesque detail and mock sentiment of Mark's. The baggage man in "The Invalid's Story" soliloquizes:

"Well-a-well, we've all got to go, they ain't no getting around it. Man that is born of woman is of few days and far between, as Scriptur' says. Yes, you look at it any way you want to, it's awful solemn and cur'us: they ain't nobody can get around it; all's got to go--just everybody, as you may say. One day you're hearty and strong"--here he scrambled to his feet and broke a pane and stretched his nose out at it a moment or two, then sat down again while I struggled up and thrust my nose out at the same place, and this we kept on doing every now and then--"and next day he's cut down like the grass, and the places which knowed him then knows him no more forever, as Scriptur' says. Yes'ndeedy, it's awful solemn and cur'us; but we've all got to go, one time or another; they ain't no getting around it."

To the Yankee tradition of Artemus Ward, Mark Twain added the narrative skill, the love of sordid detail and the humor of exaggeration of the Southwestern yarn spinner. Along with this, he applied his genius at giving immediacy to a story and his penchant for ironic satire.

Southern Illinois University

Footnote:

¹ A somewhat similar story was told in the Carson (Nevada) Daily Appeal for July 13, 1865:

A paper told of a terrible stinking odor emitting, one hot July day, from a box in the Pioneer state office.

The box was from San Francisco, and in it the agent found the corpse of an infant shipped to Washoe for burial. The reporter deplored the disgusting unnaturalness of shipping a body in hot weather, but remarked in conclusion, "The daddy must be a regular 'Old Limburger.'"

(Richard G. Lillard, "Studies in Washoe Journalism," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1943.) It is possible that both Artemus and Mark got the story from Nevada legend.

(See the "MASA Bulletin" in this issue for more on this tale. Ed.)