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Letter: Edna Turpin to Ida M. Tarbell, January 8, 1938

Turpin, Edna

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Christiansburg, Virginia
January 8, 1938

Very dear Ida Tarbell:

Nothing you ever sent was received with more delighted appreciation than the package that came to me on Christmas Eve. It is hard to believe it came two weeks ago. Just as I would have been writing holiday messages, a mighty stye came and stayed on my good eye--"good" by comparison as the left one is practically useless for reading and writing. My whole face was sore and swollen, and for days I was unhappily idle.

Thank you for the pages of manuscript. Anything in your handwriting would be prized for that American corner of my library. I love these pages, so characteristic of you, showing how you use the minutes most of us waste and how you make the introduction of a guest speaker a message as worth-while as the achievement of the--the introducer. I have at last solved the problem of framing this manuscript. It goes in a long, narrow frame glassed on both sides. On the side with the envelope addresses, is the transcript--whew! I came so near saying "translation"!

Even more than the manuscript, I love my "grave lady." This is your look of listening interest. The lips may open for quiet comment or heartening encouragement, or may curve upward in merry words wiser than solemn speech. Decidedly, I like this better than a smiling picture. But for the whitening hair, I see you as I first saw you at work in the Library of Congress. Do you realize how long ago that was? I have just had to look up some work dates and there in my notebook were records of lunching and teaing with you--brief refreshments upstairs in the Library for us busy workers--January and February, 1913. I don't know what your job was then. I was revising my History. I've told you that sad story, haven't I? If not please say so and let me tell you. It makes me so angry and so sorry for myself. Such a pleasure!

I shall write today to Adelaide Simpson's sisters and shall send her messages about the manuscript and photograph and about your grand birthday celebration in November--of which I, then buried in the country, learned days after the occasion. I have made a note of the date and will try not to be so remiss about greeting you on your ninetieth anniversary.

I meant to send you a very characteristic note I had from Adelaide Simpson Johnston some months ago. She spoke admiringly of you, regretting she had seen you only once since you taught together more than fifty years before. She quoted--she would, you know--Mrs. Browning's sonnet on "Work," but said she was enjoying her leisure though she was always glad when a daughter-in-law asked her to bake
cookies or wash dishes or when grandchildren begged her for songs and stories. She is a devoted mother, proud of her four sons. Dr. Edgar is at University of Michigan, Dr. Herrick is at University of Ohio, Francis is a business man, German delights his mother's soul by being a United Presbyterian minister, like his father, Herrick Johnston. That is my latest, rather old, news of them. Adelaida's father had five sisters, all married and with children, but I think you knew only "Aunt Janet" Lee's sons, Bert and Clyde. They practiced law together in Chicago. Clyde has one child. Bert died years ago, leaving widow and one daughter; there was some family row and Mrs. Lee has never had anything to do with her husband's people, which grieves the Simpsons as they were devoted to Bert.

Why am I chattering along instead of writing the long-winded tale I want to pour into your ears? It is about a Richmond, Virginia, man's work and the man himself whom I know slightly and admire greatly. He is Pleasanton Conquest. He writes such clever verses that five years ago Mr. John Stewart Bryan asked him to make a daily contribution to the NEWS-LEADER-- and he has kept it up, never going stale, always apt, amusing, sensible. Many of us take the NEWS-LEADER for Conquest's "At Large" verses. Of course the N.L., a local afternoon paper with moderate circulation, does not pay him much, and I fancy his small insurance business is not very profitable. His only child, a son, is just entering college-- rather, University of Virginia. The NEWS-LEADER did try to give Mr. Conquest chance to syndicate his work, but the syndicate said his verses must be in ten days at least ahead of publishing time. Their essence is their timeliness. He gets them to office by ten o'clock and they appear in the afternoon paper. It would mean a great, great deal to him to have the wider appreciation and more money that would come from -- say, one big New York paper, if not a syndicate, in addition to the NEWS-LEADER.

Even greater than my admiration for Mr. Conquest's writings is my admiration of him personally. He has an incurable, progressive eye disease-- I think it is retina pigmentosa, which Margaret Prescott Montague has. He is not even able to walk downtown alone and some one has to open and read his mail. You would never, guess it, being with him for a whole afternoon or evening. He is so alert, interested, merry, unselfconscious. You would think he put his hand on his wife's arm merely as a gesture, not for guidance. I do wish you could know him-- such a valiant, charming person. When you come to see me, you shall see him.

Here are a few of his timely verses. If you know any editor who would be interested, I am sure you will not mind handing them over and telling about the author. I think the TIMES, or any other big paper, would be doing itself a service in taking him on as contributor. Or any
magazine that could use a group of them. I thought of writing to Mr. J.S. Phillips, to whom you sent me with Margaret Montague's story; but I know him so slightly, and really a newspaper would be best that could use daily contributions.

What a volume I have written! You, fortunately, are a rapid reader.

If you find time to send me a note in reply to this epistle, please tell me how your "Recollectons" are getting on. Are they to be serialized? They ought, to bring more money and introduce them to the public that will eagerly await the volume. I wrote to Mr. Sedgwick, of the ATLANTIC, the day after you told me about them. I had no answer--learned later he was out of the country--and I have wondered if the acting editor wrote to you.

Yes, I will stop!

Love, thanks, all good wishes to you from

Yours affectionately

Edna Turpin