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October 1st, 1937

Miss Ida M. Tarbell
120 East 19th St.
New York, N. Y.

Dear Miss Tarbell:

Mark Sullivan is doing his memoirs and he sent me the part dealing with McClure's magazine and especially with me.

In the first paragraph he gives a curious picture of the workings of my mind which seems to me to be singularly inaccurate. The real fact is that I was always aiming to get as near to perfection as possible. Looking back from my present standpoint and how I have learned, I would say I had the mind similar to that of a creative artist. My overwhelming passion was to make the thing as perfect as possible.

When I conceived perfection or an approach to perfection the comparison was wholly in my mind, however I would like to have your impression of this. In fact this whole front page I don't quite understand because I am only thinking of the years when my health was normal. He also overlooks the fact that the very remarkable staff of McClure's magazine was built up largely by me.

I would like to see you especially if you would tell me from your standpoint what you think as to the accuracy of what he says.

Yours truly,

S. S. McClure

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Mark Sullivan: The Education of an American (Oct. 1, 1937)

During the period after I finished my job for Bok and before Collier's took notice of me, part of the years 1905 and 1906, I worked for McClure's.

Samuel S. McClure, I thought at the time and still think as I look back, was the preeminent magazine genius, easily first in a period in which magazines flowered as never before. I do not overlook the editors and publishers who lasted longer than McClure and had greater success. That McClure and his magazine did not endure was due mainly to the very virtues that made McClure Unique, the intensity of his preoccupation with ideas, his utter help

lessness to resist his own impulses--impluses which usually were the very yeast of magazine genius, but which tumbled out over each other with such profusion that they crowded each other out of life. With his perpetual immersion in ideas and impulses, and the hectic activities they led him into--activities so numerous, diverse and often mutually destructive that rarely could he carry any one of them to fruit--with that went utter lack of interest in money or in the material details of presses, paper, and balance-sheets. He was a Scotchman (actually born in the North of Ireland) who cared nothing for money, and regarded economy, if ever thought about it at all except as an abstraction of economics, as an irking brake on sponaneity.

He was a queer bird, but he was a great editor. Not a great editor either, not at all, for editing implies patient sitting at a desk, minute reading and emendation of manuscripts. That McClure could never do. That was for lesser men. But as a geyser of ideas, as a sensitive barometer of the moods of the time he lived in, as a supernatural senser of what persons felt and thought--as that, McClure--how shall I express it, I cannot say he sat at the head of the table, for he was too volatile and impetuous to remain through any meal. To McClure, ideas were everything. Once, he complained to me--complain is too strong a word, it was rather a gentle plaintiveness--of the repression with which his associates and subordinates tried to check and control that gusher of all the intellectual oils, gasolines and detonating explosives that ever burst from the mind of man. "I get an idea", he said. "It comes to me in the night. I lie awake until morning. I rush to the office with it--and they throw cold water on it."

I could see the point of view of his associates, trying to get a magazine printed once a month and delivered to the readers with some reasonable approximation to scheduled dates--against the undisciplined impetuosity and at times almost maniacal errant energy of a publisher who, not just once in a month but five times in a day, would have discarded an article that was in the works, often in the process of printing, for a new idea that he thought better. Often McClure's new idea was better, but a magazine must have a deadline, and it is no wonder McClure's associates and editors took on toward him a protective manner of coldness, and were only warm to him on the occasions--they were, happily for his staff, frequent--when he came to the office at nine in the morning to announce that he was sailing for Europe at twelve. Facilitation of the hurried getting of tickets and other preparations for departure was about the only function in which McClure's associates served him with unqualified cheerfulness. Yet, though I could sympathize with the harassed editors, I knew that McClure had the surer wisdom when, completing his gentle plaint, he said: "You know, Sullivan, a new idea is like a newborn child; the first thing is, keep it alive, feed it, make it grow; afterward it it does not turn out well, you can get rid of it."

McClure's eccentricity--no, that is not the word. With McClure, eccentricity was the true man; conformity or regularity, if ever for a moment he practiced it, was the aberration. His, let us say, concatenation of unusualnesses, extended into every relation he had with the world. Once, traveling together on a steamship down the Mississippi, he, with no relevancy to anything that had happened before, poked an urgent finger into an opening of my buttoned coat, passed his exploration between the buttons of my waistcoat, pressed on between the buttons of my shirt and groped about between shirt and skin. "Ha", he said exultantly, "I supposed so; you're wearing an undershirt; no one should ever wear undershirts." What reason he gave me I do not recall, if indeed I grasped at the time.

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Possibly the longest and most continuous consistency McClure ever practiced was about a theory of diet. One of the most indispensable chores of the editors and associates who aided in getting him off on his trips to Europe was to assemble enough bottles of milk to last as his only food during the voyage and to arrange for keeping them fresh, a process not easy before the days of mechanical refrigeration. Once I sat with him at breakfast at the Hotel Adlon in Berlin. His order to the waiter was for fresh lettuce and tomatoes. It was an extraordinary order for breakfast but the waiter preserved a stoic calm. As he wrote the order on his pad, he, with a sang froid which had suffered a shock but would not show it, asked McClure the question that has been heard by every diner who ever ordered a salad in any restaurant from Greenland to Little America: "French dressing or Russian dressing, sir?," McClure, with the resignation of a man who has long endured that discipline of waiters which makes them the sternest ritualists of all manking--McClure, with gentle patience, replied: "Neither, thank you: just as nature made it."

McClure was a queer bird, but a lovable man and a great one. He, under a fiction name, is the principal character in a novel by Stevenson and in another by Howells. They had come to know him in an ordinary way, as purchasers of their literary output--and they found him stranger than any fiction they could invent.

He was born in County Antrim, Ireland, lost his father while he was a young child, and was brought to America by his widowed mother, who in the early 1870's, in a town in Northern Indiana, worked as a servant for $2 a week, at a time when cost of living was high, brown sugar was 25 cents a pound. Young McClure worked at about every chore known to boy or man; he attended furnaces, mowed lawns, did washing, was a cook, a farm-hand, a peddler, a clerk in a grocery store. Supporting himself thus, he managed to get a good education, the latter part of it at an excellent college, Knox, at Galesburg, Illinois. After graduating he edited a bicycle magazine, The Wheelman; started a newspaper syndicate which bought pppular fiction and sold to newspapers the right to publish it; and, in the depth of the depression of 1893 started McClure's magazine, which, three years later, was the leader in its field and extremely prosperous.

The thoughts and ideas that sparked out from McClure's mind, the impalpable emanations of his personality, become, by some process of nature undirected by him, material things. They became presses, offices, staffs, paper, ink, hundreds of thousands of copies of printed magazines, distributors of it, readers of it, editors of it. It was not that McClure created these things, it was rather that they gravitated to him, came out of the air, to attach themselves to McClure's thoughts and make the immaterial material. They grew like coral, formed themselves into orderly structures like a cathedral of stalactities, except that they had life, which begat more life, multiplied itself, became an immense and complex living mechanism.

Journalistically, McClure was an idea-man only. His gift was idea-origination, and, in occasional moments of calm, idea-valuation a valuation usually achieved, like most of his functioning, by instinct. Editor he was not, writer he was not. If any writings by him are extant, I do not know of them (Except his autobiography). In the magazine office, when I was on the staff, there were remarks, not generous I felt, to the effect that the only direct contribution ever made to the contents of the magazine by the man to whose name it gave fame, was a few dull paragraphs of statistics and comment about something or other, I think it was the increase in crime.

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The editing of McClure's consisted largely of screening the one most practicable idea out of a hundred of McClure's suggestions, and seeing that the chosen idea was well and thoroughly developed and written. The latter was a formidable business. While the older magazines--Harper's, Scribner's, the Atlantic Monthly, the North American, the Century--were still following the placid paths of the past, selecting from the daily batch of manuscripts voluntarily submitted enough gems about literature, art or abstract public questions to fill a number, and paying the conventional stipend of a hundred or two hundred dollars--while the older magazines were following that comfortable routine, McClure's was originating ideas, sending out not one man but half a dozen to get the material, digging and checking and compiling, and composing; often a single article in McClure's represented the work of half a score investigators and writers, consumed many months of time, and cost as much as ten thousand dollars. The work of directing all this, keeping the strings clean of tangle, and seeing that a magazine was printed once a month, fell mainly, I understand, on McClure's partner, heaven-sent for that combination, John S. Philips, even-tempered, sure-footed, with a strong critical faculty combined with a strong affirmative liking for whatever was fine and sound.

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While I was writing this book, on June 3, 1937, McClure came to see me. In his 81st year he was busy with what he called "The Principles of the Organization of Human Beings". That, he said, is what we must understand before society can get anywhere; he felt sure America had not given sufficient thought to it, and he was seriously upset about the country's future.

I diverted him from his concern about the organization of society, led him to talk of the times when we were associated, told him I was writing some pages about him in my memoirs, and mentioned some things I was saying about him. He said it was true enough that he was the original Pinkerton(?). The other legend, he said, was not true; Howells once told him that the hero of The Hazard of New Fortunes was not himself, it was a compound of Silas Lapham, one of Howells' other fiction characters, together with Colonel Albert A. Pope (?), pioneer of the bicycle business in the 1880's. McClure added that another author, Alice Hegan Rice, once put him in a book, but made him talk like a South of Ireland Irishman, whereas McClure in fact came from the North.

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Of McClure's staff, the one who became best known for the longest time was Lincoln Steffens. He had been city editor of a New York evening newspaper, and McClure made him managing editor of his magazine. Then McClure, feeling that all his office men ought to know America sent Steffens on a western journey. One of the public men whom all traveling reporters called on at that time was Joseph W. Folk, then prosecuting attorney (?) of St. Louis later governor of Missouri. Folk told Steffens about municipal corruption in St. Louis, and Steffens wrote an article there. The article was captioned by the editors "The Shame of Minneapolis". Still later, St. Louis wilfully neglected to reform itself after Steffens had exposed and admonished it, he wrote a second article which the editors captioned: "The Shamelessness of St. Louis". From the start with St. Louis and Minneapolis grew a series which dealt with several cities, and which made "The Shame of the Cities" a familiar phrase, and Steffens a famous person.

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His fame lived until death, in 1937, nothing he wrote afterward attracted widespread attention. His long tenure on fame was due, I think, to the fact that he was a radical, and, living on into a period in which much of the writing was done by radicals, he was more written about than some others who had better claim to fame. To the younger generation of litierary radicals who succeeded him, Steffens was the old master, and they celebrated him.

He was called a great reporter; in his younger, obscure newspaper days he may have been; but in his better known writings I never saw a paragraph that I would have called great reporting. Hardly would I have called it reporting at all. Some of the articles that made him famous, his accounts of political corruption in cities, seemed to me to be primarily not reporting at all, and not objective at all, but at once psychic and subjective. He probed into, or surmised, the inner mind and motives of a mayor or a boss; then he wrote what Lincoln Steffens thinks about what about what Lincoln Steffens conceives to be the mind of the mind of the Mayor of Minneapolis, or Philadelphia, or what not.

I saw Steffens often, talked with him much, but never had understanding with him or of him. I felt that when one tried to hold down to some orderly sequence of logical argument, he took refuge in some evasive, grinning paradox. It was on one repartee of evasive paradox that some of his later fame rested; asked by a finger-pointing official, "Are you a Communist?" he replied, "Oh, much worse--I'm a Christian". To me it seemed that so far as he had any philosophy it was fatalism, which is not a philosophy at all, it is an acknowledgement of an inability to attain a philosophy, it is an acknowledgment of an inability to attain a philosophy, it is intellectual defeatism.

There is much evidence that some young writers found Steffens stimulating and helpful. I did not. I was never free from suspicion that he was in part a poseur. Others thought so. Once, during the Progressive Party Convention at Chicago in 1912, Edward G. Lowry lunched with him. Afterward Lowry said, "And there sat Steffens, talking revolution and blood--and sucking the guts out of a chocolate eclair impaled on an upright fork".

One reason for my failure to achieve comradeship with Steffens was my feeling that he did not appreciate the head of the magazine, Sam McClure, and my observing that Steffens was rude and arrogant to McClure. I felt also, as McClure did, that Steffens was an egotist, and a frustrated dictator. Once McClure said to me, with allusion to Steffens' Close-set stockiness of head and body, "All tyrants have short necks."

Much more admirable than Steffens' work, I though, was the writing of other members of McClure's staff: the restrained, unexcited, soberly factual exposures of Standard Oil by Ida M. Tarbell; of the insurance business by Burton J. Hendrick; of the railroads by Ray Stannard Baker. As in their writings they were simple, direct and unpretentious, so in their personal contacts were they kindly, tolerant, modest, gently humorous. I liked them and learned from them.

My connection with McClure's, lasting less than a year, was not long enough to get past the stage of apprenticeship. It was hardly of the nature of apprenticeship, for I did no office work nor did I write any articles nor attempt any. Yet the experiences I had were valuable and interesting.

When I went to the magazine, there was in the office a manuscript that later became a remarkable series of articles in the magazine and still later

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a book with a comparatively enduring life. A woman in up-state New York who, I think, had not attempted authorship before, Mrs. Georgine Milmine (?) wrote a life of the founder of Christian Science, Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy. It was a biography in somewhat the nwe manner, then the very new manner indeed. Mrs. Milmine had painstakingly grubbed for facts, reaching back many years into the early days of Mrs. Eddy, and into her ancestry, and covering with much completeness of detail the whole of her extraordinary life up to that time--Mrs. Eddy was still living. In this method, what was new was mainly the thoroughness of the search for facts. Though Mrs. Eddy and her circle and her followers showed some apprehension about the approaching publication, it did not seem to me, as I read it in manuscript, that Mrs. Milmine had approached her subject in any spirit of malice or other preconceived interpretation. I surmise that the apprehension of the Christian Scientists may have been caused in part by the fact that McClure's, in its treatment of politics and business, practiced a technique called "exposure", later designated by President Theodore Roosevelt "muckraking"; the Christian Scientists may have assumed that the biography of Mrs. Eddy would be an extension of the method and attitude into religion.

With whatever went on between McClure's and the Christian Scientists, I had no contact. I had come on the staff, I was being paid $50 a week, and something should be found for me to do. In that spirit, and because I had had legal training, the manuscript was turned over to me with no instruction except that I should subject it to an ordinary checking of facts. The seriously controversial points in the manuscript were covered, I suppose, in other ways, and after I left McClure's. The work carried me into remote points in New Hampshire and elsewhere in New England, the scenes of Mrs. Eddy's early experiences and birth and ancestry, to hamlets far from the railraods, which could only be reached by horse and wagon, and at least one which could not be reached at all, for it had disappeared--I recall an elderly New Englander pointing to some depressions in the earth which he said had been the cellars of houses, in one of which Mrs. Eddy had lived as a child. It is episodes of that kind that now chiefly remain in my memory: a long drive on a May morning to a village in the Eastern New Hampshire mountains; another drive up a long hill somewhere near Franklin, New Hampshire, and on the ridge at the wind-swept top a gaunt house which struck me as a good setting for a gloomy novel---one of many impulses toward fiction--writing which I never followed.

My second assignment at McClure's was to subject to a similar checking a manuscript that had been turned in by a Montana lawyer named Christopher P. Connolly, a story dealing with the feuds of the copper kings, Daly, Heinze, and Clark, and with the manipulations of Montana politics, bizarre almost beyound credibility. My checking of Connolly's "Story of Montana" went little beyond going to Missoula, Montana, where he lived. His fineness of character intellectual integrity and exactness of mind were so readily apparent as to leave me little to do beyond a superficial examination of the court records and other documents upon which his book was irrefutably based.

My last assignment took me to Louisville, Kentucky. That city had been reported to McClure's as a proper subject for incluison in the series on municipal corruption which Lincoln Steffens was writing, the "Shame of the Cities". Steffens was so busy finding shame here, there and elsewhere that he could not cover all the cities that clamored for his attention. "Clamored" is the suitable word; a remarkable feature of that series was that cities, or many citizens in them, seemed to take a morbid pleasure in being included. They wrote letters to McClure's, crying, "Expose us next"; many enclosed briefs or fragmentary manuscripts or"leads" to the mine of shame.

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It was in response to some such request that I went to Louisville. The shame was there as it was in practically every American city; whether Louisville's was more gross or less so than that of other cities, whether it lent itself in greater degree or less to magazine treatment, was a matter of comparison and journalistic judgement. I remained there some weeks and made reports to McClure's. What part of the experience remains most in my memory is a Christmas dinner, and other kindnesses, given me by Mrs. George Madden Martin, author of the "Emmy Lou" stories, who lived outside Louisville at a place called Anchorage; acquaintance with a picturesque editor of the day, Colonel Henry Watterson; and the hotel I stopped at, the Galt House, last, I think, of the old-time, big-roomed, high-ceilinged, ornate hotels of the old South--in most cities they were called "The Planters".

After I returned to New York, friendly divorce was arranged between me and McClure's. I began, in the early part of 1906, my work with Collier's.

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