

Chap. VIII

Digital Image, 2013. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

Mr. Hubbard had long been a Napoleon collector. The revival in interest in the man in the early '90's had made him feel that his collection ought to be reproduced for the public. But he insisted a suitable text, that is, one he liked, must go with the picture. Mr. McClure had secured one from an able Englishman Robert Sherard, a grandson of Wordsworth, but it was so contemptuously anti-Napoleon that Mr. Hubbard would not allow his picture to go with it. And here it was August and Mr. McClure with the head-long speed in which he conducted affairs had announced the first installment for November.

- - - - -

In passing through New York in June I had given Mr. McClure the right to call upon me promising to join his staff after my vacation. He would give me forty dollars a week - more money than I had ever expected to earn. With care I could save enough to carry me back to Paris and at the same time I could learn more of the needs of the McClure organization.

- - - - -

I would try, I told Mr. McClure, at his expense, but I would have to go back at once to Paris. Where else could I get sufficient material? And perhaps that idea of getting to Paris encouraged me to try but first we all agreed I must go to Washington and talk with Mr. Hubbard, look over the collection.

- - - - -

h. 8
pg 153

I liked Mrs. Hubbard particularly for the way she accepted Mr. McClure in the days to come. He would burst unexpectedly into the house at any moment which suited his convenience, his bag loaded with proofs of the Napoleon prints and almost before he had made his greeting the bag was open and the proofs spread helter skelter over the carpet. Being very much on my good behavior I was a little horrified myself, and then I did so want them to like and appreciate Mr. McClure. when I tried to apologize for the dishevelment he wrought Mrs. Hubbard laughed:- "That eagerness of his is beautiful," she said, "I am accustomed to geniuses." And so she was as I was to find.

- - - - -

The Napoleon had given the magazine, now in its second year, the circulation boost it needed. My part in it was not exaggerated by the office or by me. We all agreed that it was the pictures that had done it, but the text had framed the pictures, helped bring out their value and it had been done at a critical moment.

I must stay with them, declared Mr. McClure. And the more I saw of Mr. McClure and his colleagues the more I wanted to stay. Of my first impression of S. S. McClure in Paris I have spoken. Closer views emphasized and enlarged that impression. He was as eager as a dog on the hunt - never satisfied, never quiet. Creative editing, he insisted, was not^{to}/be done by sitting

at a desk in a comfortable office. It was only done in the field following scents, hunts. An omnivorous reader of newspapers, magazines, books, he came to his office daily primed with ideas, possibilities, and there was always a chance that among them was a stroke of genius. He hated nothing so much in the office as settled routine, wanted to feel stir from the door to the inner sanctum. And he had great power to stir excitement by his suggestions, his endless searching after something new, alive, startling, and particularly by his reporting.

He stood in awe of no man, but dashed back and forth over the country, back and forth to Europe interviewing the great and mighty. He brought back from his forays contracts with Stevenson, Conan Doyle, Anthony Hope, Kipling. It was something to find yourself between the cover of a book printing a Jungle Story. They all came out in McClure's in those years.

- - - - -

Mr. McClure was always peering over the Edge of the Future. It was this search for what was on the way that brought to McClures the first articles in an American Magazine on radium, the X-ray, Marconi's wireless - Lilienthal's and Octave Chanute's gliders - Langley's steam driven air-runner and in time the first article on the Wright's flying machine.

In my field of biography and history the Edge of the Future meant to him the "unpublished" or the so poorly published that its reappearance was equal to a first appearance.

PA 155

The success of a feature spurred him to effort to get more of it, things which would sharpen and perpetuate the interest. He was ready to look into any suggestion however unlikely it might seem to the cautious minded. He was never afraid of being fooled, only of missing something.

His quick taking of a hint, his warm reception of new ideas, new facts, had its drawbacks. If they were dramatic and stirring Mr. McClure was impatient of investigation. He wanted the fun of seeing his finds quickly in print. At one point in the publication of the Napoleon he caused me real anxiety by his apparent determination to print a story for which I could find no authority.

Among the contributors to the Syndicate at that time was a picturesque European with a title and an apparently endless flow of gossip. He pretended to have been a member of the Court of Napoleon III and in the confidence of the Emperor. This relation accounted for his having been invited to join a strange secret party made up by the Emperor who was worried over a rumor that the body of Napoleon I didnt lie under the dome of des Invalides. It was not known who did lie there or what had become of Napoleon. To reassure himself the Emperor decided to go with a few chosen friends and open the tomb. They gathered in the dead of night. The tomb was opened. There lay Napoleon, unchanged. The Emperor's mind was at rest. He swore the group to secrecy, but took affidavits to be used in case

of political necessity. The fall of the Empire seems to have made the ^{countryman} gentleman feel that his oath was no longer binding and that he could cash in on his adventure.

I did not believe the story but when I expressed my doubt all I could get out of Mr. McClure was a severe, "What a pity you do not know something about Napoleon." No new idea to me, since it was the first thing I was thinking every morning when I went to work. What I did not know as I worried over the possible publication of what I believed a fake was that in spite of his quick and enthusiastic acceptance of a good story, S. S. McClure was wary. Moreover, he had a contempt for the thing that wasn't true, a contempt for mistakes. Good stories - yes - but they must be true stories. Moreover, he knew what I did not as yet, that he could go the limit in his enthusiasms since he had at his side a partner on whom he counted more I think than he then realized to pull him back at the edge of a precipice.

This happened now. The story was in type, scheduled. Mr. McClure was going to Europe. "While you'r over there, Sam," said this partner quietly, "you better verify that Napoleon story. We'll hold it until we hear from you."

A few weeks later came a laconic postal card. "Don't publish the story of the opening of Napoleon's tomb. It wasn't opened."

I never heard the matter referred to after that. By the time he returned he had forgotten what to me was a near tragedy, to him a joyful bit of editorial adventure.

I came later to feel that this quick kindling of the imagination, this untiring curiosity, this determination to run down every clue until you had it there on the table, its worth or worthlessness in full view, was one of Mr. McClure's greatest assets, but it was an asset that would have landed him frequently in hot water if it had not been for the partner who had saved him from the Napoleon hoax - John S. Phillips, J. S. P. as he was known in the office.

Living in Washington as I had been doing I had seen little of Mr. Phillips, only heard of him for his name was the one often on Mr. McClure's tongue. His calm and tactful handling of the "General" as the office called Mr. McClure in the ticklish Napoleon story delighted me.