


**CRUSADERS FOR
AMERICAN LIBERALISM**

BY LOUIS FILLER

The Antioch Press  Yellow Springs, Ohio

Copyright, 1939 by
Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc.

New Edition
Copyright, 1950, 1961 by Louis Filler

Printed in the United States of America

VIII. THE SHAME OF THE CITIES

FREDERIC HOWE met Steffens after the muckraker's first municipal-graft articles had made their appearance. In his reminiscences he later told of his astonishment on meeting Steffens. He had expected to see a tall, imposing, worldly type of reformer, the kind who could be expected to make himself at home among thieves and hard-mannered financiers and politicians. Here was, instead, a little keen-faced gentleman with a string tie—an artist, not a reformer at all. This man was, in fact, an artist of sorts. Although during the ten active years of his life that preceded muckraking he was a newspaperman and editor, he always believed that his ultimate work would be novel writing or social philosophy. Throughout these ten years, he debated with himself just what to do when and if he put journalism aside.

Steffens was, after all, no ordinary city boy who had gone to work, no ordinary reformer. The son of well-to-do people, he had spent his youth in Sacramento, or rather, around it; for his remarkable parents had given him a horse to ride and the freedom to do as he pleased. This freedom had been the making of him; it had made him rich in experience and strength, with a wealth that he was to pour out in sunny profusion when he came to tell the full story of his early days.

Steffens was not brought up; he grew—and, growing, drank in the free, varied life about him. He couldn't understand the political corruption to which he was casually introduced at the Capitol, but he remembered it; knowledge of it entered into his personality. He attended a military academy and then the University of California. When he left for Germany to complete his education, he was interested in history, philosophy, and science, in the active, questioning manner that characterized him. Germany was to be a training ground for him, not an end in itself: Steffens

meant to bring back something with him to the America he had such good reason to love. And so, though he absorbed himself in art and ethics and studied seriously the methods of Wundt, and though he traveled to Heidelberg and Munich and Leipzig, on his return to America he was perfectly willing to discuss with his father the possibility of entering business.¹ Business, he recognized, was America in a special way, and he wanted to understand America: such understanding would fill out his equipment for literature. But he remained in Europe long enough to marry, to study at the Sorbonne and in the British Museum, and only then returned to conquer his native country.

At quarantine Steffens was met by a stunning letter from his father. The letter informed him that he had received everything in the way of preparation for which he had asked; enclosed was one hundred dollars, which should keep him till he could find a job and support himself. Steffens at once began his search for work, which he finally found with the help of introductions: he became in 1892 a reporter for Godkin's *Evening Post*. Ethics and philosophy and fiction went overboard as he labored to make a place for himself in the esteem of the editors.

Being a reporter meant meeting everybody—business men, the clergy, professionals, politicians, and the common people of the city. Steffens won them all with his personality. He had an air that gave them confidence and, very significantly, encouraged them to tell him what he wanted to know. He was “the gentleman reporter”; it was a pleasure to talk with him. But there was another quality in his makeup that enabled him to succeed with these people and finally brought him to the attention of the nation at large: imagination.

Steffens had a fascinated interest in men and motives that completely individualized him. If the study of ethics had done nothing else for him, it had emancipated him from the conventional habit of dividing people into the good ones and the bad, friends and enemies. His courtesy was more than deference or form: it was his tribute to the essential humanity and importance he saw in everyone. Trying to understand people, he made them feel important. All the while he thought he was storing up knowledge

¹ See *The Letters of Lincoln Steffens*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1938.

that would help him in future literary works. Yet he was no scavenger. The attention and sympathy he gave to people was free and sincere; and these people—from "Clubber" Williams of the New York police to J. P. Morgan—appreciated it.

After a period of general reporting Steffens was assigned to Wall Street, where he picked up basic information and put it to good use. He then became a police reporter, and this job revealed to him the police-criminal tie-up. That tie-up was disillusioning, but whereas it would have made the ordinary reporter a cynic, it turned Steffens toward men with a will to fight the rank social evils. He learned to despise the ordinary reformer; the resolution-passer, the club-paper reader, the charity matron who had nothing to offer but vanity and leisure. He became the friend of men like Jacob Riis and reform Police Commissioner Roosevelt and vice-crusader Rey. Charles H. Pankhurst—people capable of causing a genuine stir.

Steffens did not theorize or generalize about what he saw: he was much too busy. But he followed a logic of inquiry that enlightened him beyond many of his associates. The sight of wounded strikers brought in regularly by the police sent him out to the sweatshops to find the reason for the trouble. The experience of talking to Richard Croker, New York's boss politician, humanized the Tammany-ogre for him, made him see that Croker was no isolated corruptionist but an agent of respectable men—men who considered themselves the boss's moral and social superiors. This discovery did not cause Steffens to look suspiciously at the financially successful men whom he was always meeting, for he understood them, too. He himself took a legacy he had received from a German friend, invested it in Wall Street, and so provided himself with a competency that freed him for life from money worries. Again, Steffens was still as ignorant as anyone else of the deeper economic issues—more ignorant than labor leaders or radical intellectuals, more ignorant than advocates of the trust who knew how inevitable were the current industrial consolidations. But Steffens learned from everyone, and forgot nothing.

In 1897 a group of newspaper editors which included Steffens seceded from the *Evening Post* and took over the broken-down *Commercial Advertiser*. Steffens became its city editor, and with his associates he made it an extraordinary newspaper. It rejected

the usual methods and journalists. It called frankly for men who were fresh and ambitious, individuals who were or wanted to be writers. Steffens surrounded himself with unorthodox young men who were to go far in the following years: Abraham Cahan, Harvey O'Higgins, Hutchins Hapgood and his brother Norman, Eugene Walter, and others.² This circle turned out a newspaper which was the delight not only of literary folk but of a much larger public.

This work carried Steffens through the Spanish-American War and the succeeding prosperity into the new century. By 1901 he was well-known, counting among his friends and co-workers many of the most able people in New York. He had sold a number of stories and articles, some of them to McClure, and had written a large section of a novel which dealt with Schmittberger, one of the police officials who had figured in the Lexow investigation. But in 1901 he was tired, worn out, uncertain of his next move. Newspaper life had no more to give him, and, as his fellow editors were beginning to observe, he had no more to give it. It was at this opportune time that one of McClure's editors approached him with the proposition that he join them as managing editor. Steffens accepted. He always described himself as managing editor; his letters reveal the same notion. McClure himself seems to have considered Steffens merely a "desk editor"; Steffens was surely not Tarbell's superior. At any rate, he was given a desk, wrote articles and stories which drew richly from his knowledge of politics and police, and otherwise made himself part of the magazine.

Whatever his official position, Steffens was no editor; he was a writer. It was because he was a writer that he had done so well with the effervescent staff of the *Commercial Advertiser*. McClure's was different: there were no writers to direct; contributions came from the outside; staff writers brought in material that demanded editorial discussion and arrangement; articles had to be planned and public interest sounded. Steffens quickly became aware that he knew nothing of all this, and although McClure believed in him and was pleased with his work, he found no use for him in the office. Steffens, he felt, would have to learn how a

² See his *Autobiography* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1931), Chapter XVIII, "A Happy Newspaper Staff."

magazine was made, how the staff writers did their work, and he could not learn it in New York.

McClure therefore decided to send him out on a roving commission to look for material. Apparently Tarbell suggested that there would be the makings of a good article in the Cleveland city administration, which Tom Johnson had made front-page news. Steffens did not heed the suggestion, for Johnson was a "reformer" and Steffens knew "reformers"—there was nothing to them. At all events, *McClure's* had a bill against the Lackawanna Railroad for advertising. So Steffens boarded a Westbound train and settled back to enjoy the ride.

New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago. St. Louis, Butte, San Francisco. . . . No wonder the average American did not know what to make of his country or government! If so practiced a journalist as Steffens did not know the bare facts of corruption in any city but his own, what was the ordinary reader of party newspapers to make of even his own city?

Dr. Albert Shaw, the scholarly editor of *The Review of Reviews*, had written careful and detailed studies of municipal government in England and on the Continent, and these seemed to indict the American way, at least by inference. They taught method (but only method, and only by inference) to Frederic Howe when he came to write his own standard studies of American municipalities. Again, E. L. Godkin had turned a direct gaze on America,³ but only to show that "democracy" had not done so well as its founders had hoped it would: "the people" had not shown a desire or competence to employ leading men to manage the growing cities. "Politicians" were corrupt, not at all like the "business men" who were the real support of the country. Godkin had not gone into the dirty details corruption involved: he had sustained a kind of polite faith in the ultimate good sense of the people and for the edification of his countrymen had reported democracy as it was being practiced in Australia and New Zealand. If *The Boss*, by Henry Chambernowne,⁴ had been a less seemly

³ In *Unforeseen Tendencies of Democracy*, Houghton Mifflin & Co., Boston, 1898.

⁴ *An Essay upon the Art of Governing American Cities*, G. H. Richmond & Co., New York, 1894.

production, it had, at least, the virtue of feeling. This writer had lost faith in democracy; he expected nothing of the people. Blindly, misanthropically, he had modeled his book after Machiavelli, advising "the boss" on how best to extend and preserve his control.

There had been other such productions revealing an awareness of the change that had come over government—the awareness of bewildered men unable to grasp or explain that change, much less to give battle to it. When Steffens entrained for Chicago, Hazen Smith Pingree was already dead—Pingree, who for ten years, and apparently without advice or encouragement, had waged a single-handed war against gas, electric, and street-railway corporations in the interest of the people of Detroit. Pingree had exercised an alarming influence on the public imagination. Mayor (then Governor) Pingree's "peculiar economic notions" had been a public scandal for years, but not so public that details were easily available. Now he was dead, but one heard disturbing rumors of a certain Samuel Minton Jones, who had, in a moment of aberration on the part of the local political machine, been made mayor of Toledo. Welsh-born, he had been brought to America as a child and after youthful hardships had gone to work in the oil fields. His rise had been rapid: inventions had made him wealthy, and he had finally founded in Toledo the Acme Sucker Rod Company, which he made famous as the "Golden Rule Factory"—a factory which treated its employees with unprecedented humaneness. Just the man for a reform administration! But to the general dismay, Jones had gone ahead as though he owed nothing to party or politicians. He was revealed in all his awful belief in the practicality of Christianity; he issued to his employees *Letters of Love and Labor*⁵ (which must be read to be believed), gathered inspired young men about him, turned the police department on its head with his humane and unorthodox treatment of criminals, fought the public utilities corporations. Naturally he was denounced in the churches and boycotted in the newspapers, and both parties disclaimed him. "Golden Rule" Jones had run on a non-party platform and had been triumphantly re-elected. He was

⁵ Privately printed (uncopyrighted), Toledo, 1900; expanded, with an introduction by Brand Whitlock, Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis, 1905.

about to be re-elected again in 1903: nobody wanted him but the common people.

Tom L. Johnson, Mayor of Cleveland, had publicly asserted, rather than confessed, that he had made his fortune from unfair monopoly holdings. Johnson was now a Single-Taxer—had been for years. He had been Henry George's campaign manager in the New York mayoralty elections. As a Congressman he had banded with several others to read into the *Congressional Record* the entire text of George's *Protection or Free Trade*, a million copies of which had been distributed free to the citizens of America. Opinion was that he was a dangerous demagogue and ought to be curbed. Meanwhile he was creating fearful battles in Cleveland, where he was fighting his former colleagues on franchise issues.

Single
Taxer

Such were the forces for protest in the land when Steffens went forth to find articles for McClure. Steffens could have been no voice crying in the wilderness. Had there been no one but Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* would never have been written, let alone printed. Steffens was a son of his times.

He went as far as Chicago and there looked up William Boyden, a lawyer, who suggested that there should be an article in Weyerhauser, of St. Paul, who had become, in a quiet way, the timber king of America. Steffens did see Weyerhauser and had a heart-to-heart talk with him concerning the cost of becoming a rich man. He was, however, sworn to secrecy and therefore had no article. He returned to Chicago, and from Boyden now learned for the first time of Joseph Wingate Folk, who was raising so violent a row in St. Louis. Steffens now boarded a train for that city to investigate the suggestion.

Samuel Merwin, of whom we shall hear again, later declared that it was Folk, not Steffens, who began political muckraking, and in more than one sense this is true. Folk forced the issue of exposure upon Steffens. Having started desperate events moving in St. Louis, Folk was looking for help at the same time that Steffens was looking for material. Steffens had no plan when he went West—only the conviction that articles could be written to synopsise some event that had been spreading its interesting details over many days: "to take confused, local, serial news of the newspapers and report it all together in one long short story for the whole

country.”⁶ Here was an aim as revolutionary as it was simple; and here was Folk who needed that synopsis as he needed nothing else.

Folk, a native of Tennessee, had come to St. Louis to practice law. A pleasant young man who was “regular” in politics, he worked hard and patiently expected that it would be long before he became a success. He quietly assumed that the St. Louis regime was a government of, by, and for the people, and therefore said nothing about it. He was more surprised than overjoyed by the offer he received to run as attorney for the circuit. The local bosses had come to an impasse in finding a man for the office, and the harmless, popular Folk seemed just the man. “I’ll have to do my duty,” Folk warned. And nobody, of course, expected him to do anything else. But to their consternation he went ahead and did it! He prosecuted men who had been caught repeating at the polls, not only Republicans but the very Democrats who had elected him. He refused to accept men into his office merely because they were party men. He followed up the cases that came to his attention with such persistence that he was threatened with political ruin. He held to his course, however, with the stubborn determination to make his official position mean something at any cost.

Late in January 1902 Folk’s attention was called to a brief newspaper item stating that promoters had just banked a large sum of money to pay for the bribing of assemblymen in a street-railway grab. With daring and imagination, Folk went ahead to uncover the truth about the proposed bribery. He indicted hundreds of witnesses, made deals with them, discovered the higher-ups hiding in the background. With horror he found the latter to be not criminals but the most revered and respected of all the citizens in St. Louis—and elsewhere. The newspapers which had at first approved his work now deserted him entirely, and Folk saw himself in danger of losing all public support.

This was the story that Folk poured out to Steffens in a hotel lobby in St. Louis. Steffens listened eagerly. He wrote McClure that he had a story for him, and, as an editor, he looked about for the man who could write it. Folk suggested Claude Wetmore,

⁶ See Steffens’s *Autobiography*, page 368.

who had been writing actively on the subject. Steffens assigned the job to Wetmore, but when he read Wetmore's manuscript he saw that it was not what he wanted: Wetmore had toned down many details that Steffens had wanted brought out. Wetmore remonstrated; he had to go on living in St. Louis, and he couldn't do it if he told the whole truth. (Later, when muckraking was se-



JOSEPH W. FOLK

Ohio State Journal

curely established, Wetmore was emboldened to write a more elaborate version in *The Battle Against Bribery*.) Steffens compromised by dividing responsibility with him for the exposé sections that were forthwith added.

When it appeared in *McClure's*, "Tweed Days in St. Louis" had the character of an SOS to the American people. Folk became at once nationally known, as convictions were brought in against outstanding millionaires. Steffens's name, too, was on every tongue. McClure recognized that he had discovered a public vein of interest that needed only mining. And Steffens did not look for any more subjects: he had them.

During the next several years Steffens visited many cities and wrote them up for his magazine. Each article made its separate

sensation and placed him higher in public estimation. Many were the reasons why his reputation grew enormously despite the fact that other writers soon joined him in producing exposés. Wetmore, for instance, never again rose to the opportunity Steffens had given him. He knew nothing except St. Louis, and he could not get at such first-hand material as Steffens found—material such as the famous “big mitt ledger” of Minneapolis, which showed the daily accounts kept between the police and the criminals whom they directed. Wetmore also lacked Steffens’s knowledge of human nature, his artist’s ability to draw vivid and rousing pictures of the politicians and characters whom the stories presented. This gift of Steffens’s was enough to make him the outstanding writer on the themes which he had introduced in their most dramatic form, but it was not the reason that the reader kept turning to him instead of other writers. Steffens was accounted political muckraking’s greatest authority because he gave more than sensations, more than corruption: he gave the formula for municipal corruption as it was to be found not only in St. Louis, or Minneapolis, or elsewhere, but anywhere. With the laboratory scientist’s eye for fundamentals he traced out the American city structure with the party machine acting between organized business, the official city government, graft circles and plain criminals.

The picture was damning. Heretofore the East had blamed the West for the disgraceful state of government; the “old stock” families had blamed the immigrants; the old cities had blamed the new. Here was St. Louis, Western and German, indeed, but what of Philadelphia? “Corrupt and content,” Steffens labeled it. And Rhode Island—with the very best of the old stock—was being sold by its voters for small change.

The old apologists were not silenced by Steffens, but they lost their influence upon the thought of the nation. People turned eagerly to Steffens for remedies. But Steffens vigorously disclaimed having any to give: he himself was learning just as fast as he could, and was still only one step ahead of his audience. His own uncertainty was what gave a certain air of tense expectancy to his articles; no one knew where they would lead. So far as he could see, the trouble lay in the lack of representative government. There were plenty of laws, but what remedy could help a people that would not insist on having the laws enforced? At that very

moment Folk in St. Louis was seeing his convictions set aside by the State Superior Court; the people of St. Louis were not supporting him. Folk was forced to run for Governor of Missouri to support his work—and he was elected Governor at a time when he could not have been re-elected to his attorneyship! In Philadelphia, Steffens observed an attempted gas-franchise grab that



A PICTURE POST CARD

Thousands like it were mailed to Philadelphia Councilmen by irate citizens.

Collier's, June 17, 1905

brought out a citizens' vigilance committee which threatened the councilmen with lynching if they gave the city's gasworks away. Civic rage stopped the grab, but the political machine went on as before. In Chicago, too, Steffens observed a strong reform movement literally being killed by the leading citizens: it seemed they wanted "good government," not representative government.

What *was* the solution? McClure thought he knew, and he was willing to have Steffens go as far as he liked in exposure: Steffens's work provided him with added proof for his own theories. The trouble with America was democracy. And here McClure was willing to push ahead from where Godkin had halted: what the cities

needed was strong men, dictators if necessary. Steffens was at liberty to puzzle over the failure of government so long as his puzzlement produced good articles. It would be clear in the end that the cities' difficulty was that they were not run according to a business plan like cities in Germany and England.

McClure seemed unable to notice that business men had been found at the bottom of bribery and public robbery in the great exposures. Seemly business names, it is true, occurred in Steffens's articles; all business men were not robbers. Yet even the most virtuous did not contribute to campaign funds, for example, out of pure party loyalty. If there was any conclusion to be drawn from such analysis, McClure failed to reach it. His was an ironical blindness, for even then Ida Tarbell was telling *McClure's* readers of curious facts about business—in fact, about the biggest business in the country: the Standard Oil Company.