The following pdf document titled “The Story of Ulysses S. Grant,” is an excerpt from:


- Garland wrote a wonderful biography of Ulysses S. Grant (*Ulysses S. Grant, His Life and Character*, published in 1898) at a time when he had access to individuals who had actually known Grant. This lent a strong air of reality to the biography in which readers are almost magically transported to 19th century America where they learn about the extraordinary life of the man who saved the Union in rich and transcendent detail.

- In the following section from *Roadside Meetings*, Garland’s retrospective of his life’s experiences as an author, he reflects upon his growing admiration for Grant as he proceeds through the biographical research and writing process.

This section from *Roadside Meetings* is reproduced here with permission from Hamlin Garland’s granddaughter, Vicki Jones, Woodside California, November 21, 2009. The author of this website greatly appreciates her willingness to share the insights of her grandfather about General and President Ulysses S. Grant.
I doubt if McClure cared very much about its literary style; he was concerned with making his magazine known as a bold and enterprising truth dispenser. I must not do him an injustice. He admired Miss Tarbell's work, but it was an admiration based on its array of new and interesting data rather than upon its finish. He was essentially the journalist. Miss Tarbell's "Life of Lincoln" was in the nature of a "scoop."

Phillips, slower to move and much more logical in method, smiled at some of his partner's enthusiasms, but accepted others and made them practicable. Together they made a powerful team. They changed the quality of American magazines as Hearst was changing the tone and make-up of newspapers. Soon other periodicals were approximating McClure's idea of a monthly newspaper. He made each issue up to date or as near to it as the public would allow, and put the price low. He tried it at ten cents, then fifteen, and it prospered. It found a place on the news stand and I was a prophet discredited.

One day in January, 1896, as I was talking with McClure at his new office on East Twenty-fifth Street, he said, "Garland, I want you to write a life of Grant to follow Miss Tarbell's 'Lincoln.' We'll allow you a monthly salary and all your expenses in search of materials, and a royalty on the book when it comes out."

I was not altogether surprised, for I had once said to him that a life of Grant was the one history I could afford to write; but I asked for a day or two to think it over. I had just published "Rose of Dutcher's Coulee," a novel of Wisconsin, and had in hand a series of short stories of Colorado. To undertake a life of Grant would mean at least two years
of hard work upon facts, and I wondered if historical research might not dry up my fictional enthusiasms altogether. . . . Was this to be the end of my story writing?

The consideration which finally led me to undertake the work was the fact that Grant was essentially the pioneer. All his early life was spent on the border. Furthermore he was my father's commander and my boyhood's hero. His fine Scotch name had rung in my youthful ear like a deep-toned bell. Two of the finest words in my childhood memory were Grant and Lincoln. What noble names they were! One Scotch, the other English. "I will undertake the task at once," I said to McClure, "but I must do it in my own way. I want to do a new kind of biography."

The concept which I had in mind was substantially this:

"As no man can at any time foresee his future, I shall picture Grant as he lived from year to year with no provision of his ultimate fame. I shall tell his epic story as it unrolled, never once saying 'no one would have supposed'—or 'who would have imagined that this man, bumbling along wood into St. Louis, would in three years . . . etc.'—for to do so would be to give away every climax. Such a method leads to false emphasis. Grant was in despair in 1856. He saw no way out and I shall treat of him, at every stage of his career, as if he were the chief character in a novel. I shall present the facts in their chronological order, following my hero from one climax to another."

I remember outlining my concept to Howells and receiving his approval of it; but McClure was not convinced. He wanted each installment to be successful in itself, not as a step in a dramatic progress. Nevertheless I succeeded measurably, for correspondents asked, "Why did you end your chapter with Grant so hopeless?" McClure saw this as a
criticism, whereas to me it was precisely the compliment I most valued. I had succeeded in making Ulysses Grant so real that these readers forgot his later triumphs and shared his hopeless days in the home of Harry Boggs in 1859, just as they would have done in life.

Naturally I sought the aid of the Grant family. Mrs. Grant, a plain little woman, gave me several interviews and told me much of her early life on the Gravois when Lieutenant Grant used to ride over from Jefferson Barracks to visit her; but I got most help from his son, Ulysses, Jr., who was living on a noble farm in Putnam County, New York. First of all he aided me in visualizing the general, for he said, "I am of the same height as my father, with the same coloring of hair and eyes, and I am said to possess the same voice and manner of speaking."

It chanced that Ulysses Grant, Jr. and I were of the same weight and height and as I did not consider myself a small man, I began to understand why General Grant was "a little fellow" to Lincoln and of "medium size" to most people. He was a powerful man physically and capable of prolonged endurance of hunger and fatigue.

One of the most astonishing things Ulysses, Jr. said was this:

"My father was a singularly gentle and kindly man. He never spoke harshly to me in his life, and only once reproved me sternly. He was always low-voiced even when expressing anger. I was present in the White House when one of the officers whom he had dismissed for cause came in to plead for reinstatement. My father was writing. For a long time he endured the man's pleading which was almost hysterical. At last he raised his eyes and looked the officer in the face; then without a word, waved his lifted pen back and forth in
a negative sign, and resumed writing. The man rushed from
the room and out of the office. I never knew my father to
exhibit greater anger than this."

As I entered upon my search for biographical material, I
found myself acting as judge and jury in weighing the mass
of confused testimony. On the one hand I discounted the
testimony of those whose political prejudices led to a
belittling of the general, and on the other made allowance
for the loyalty of his friends. But this fact stood out: the
closer I got to his fireside in camp as well as at home, the
plainer, simpler, and more admirable he became.

Another point on which all agreed was his astounding
memory. Over and over again, men and women who had
met him in youth and again long years afterward, related
precisely the same experience. "Grant knew me at once and
called me by name." He never forgot a name or a face, and
similarly he never forgot a kindness. No matter how humble
the individual he remembered and rewarded him. He was
the most democratic of commanders. He detested parade,
glitter, pomp, but he was a disciplinarian. He was reticent
and singularly clean-lipped. He never swore, never told
course stories and he would not permit others to tell them in
his presence. He never raised his voice even in command.
He was generous in allowing others their full share of honor.

His enemies repeated stories of his drinking, of his pov-
erty, but none of them made charge against his honesty, his
magnanimity, or his essential justice. They called him an
"accident," a "blunderer," "a weak executive," and "a bad
judge of men"; but they admitted that he was "a kindly, nice
man." Some of these allegations offset others. How could a
"decayed West Point captain" command "the influence of
the great"? How could an "accident" grow against circum-
stance? One man, one of his bitterest enemies, after raging against him all one afternoon, ended by saying to me, "With all that, he was a nice, friendly man."

I soon found that most of the stories discreditable to him arose from the pen of a reporter sent out by an opposition newspaper after his nomination as candidate for the Presidency. I learned at once that he had never worked in a tannery, and that the nearest he came to it was driving a horse for a bark mill. His father did not own a tannery in Galena; it was a leather store, and Captain Grant's work was that of clerk and bookkeeper.

There was nothing complicated in his life. The closer I got to his actual character the simpler it became. The dreadful complications were all in the minds of his enemies, who saw him from the outside. Whatever he did was straightforward, plain, unadorned, with no subtleties. The machinations of which he was accused by those who did not know him are comical. He was "plain as an old stove," one of his under officers said of him; and so he was until his subconscious military genius came into play. "He wrought best when pushed hardest," said one of his generals. Another said, "He grew with circumstance." To me his life was more essentially epic than Lincoln's and the deeper I dug into his records the keener my interest became. To go, in less than four years, from a little leather store in a small Western town to the command of a million men, is one of the most astounding flights in all history—and stranger still, he remained the same considerate, unassuming neighbor he had been at the beginning. He grew with circumstances, but he kept his head, his poise through it all. "He is a quiet little fellow," said Lincoln; "the only way I can tell he is around is by the way he keeps things moving."
In my search of local records which would give me the facts of Grant’s youth, I went to Georgetown, Ohio, St. Louis, Sackett Harbor, and Detroit. For his early war record I dug up local newspapers in Springfield and Galena, and called upon the men who were associated with him at Vicksburg and Chattanooga.

One of the most memorable of all my interviews was that I had with General Longstreet, his classmate at West Point, and one of the most formidable of his antagonists during the war. I found him living in the outskirts of Gainesville, Georgia, and when my guide pointed out a small frame house and said, “General Longstreet lives there,” I was amazed. It was as humble as the home of a day laborer, and I could not relate the farmer, somber, gray who met me at the door with the Commander of whom Grant wrote with affection and respect as a great soldier and a man of high character. He said in his “Memoirs”: “I considered him one of the ablest military leaders of the South.” Longstreet had been one of the first to renew his allegiance to the Union and he had done all he could to rebuild the South in terms of peace, to the result that he had been almost completely ostracized by his own people. Now here he was, earning a scant living as a Georgia fruit grower.

He was a tall old man, slightly stooping and partly deaf, but a noble figure withal. In the talk which followed, he conveyed to me in spite of his bare and ugly surroundings the epic sweep of his own life, and testified to the greatness of Grant. Few men understood Grant better than he. “I knew him,” he said authoritatively. “He was a noble citizen and a great soldier. Nothing is gained for Lee by belittling Grant.

“I live alone in these two rooms,” he explained; “the
other end of my house is rented to a workman and his wife.

The woman helps me in my housekeeping.” He said this
quietly, but to me it was an incredible situation. I walked
away with a sense of wonder that so great a change could
come in the fortunes of a citizen once so renowned. I had
found other officers of both armies living obscurely but none
so drearily as this great Southerner. The sight of his gaunt
figure moving about his little shack gave me an appalling
sense of change. “Haste is imperative,” I wrote, “for the
chief actors of the war are dying.” Even as I copied out my
notes some of the most valuable of my witnesses died.
Before the book was completed, scores of others dropped
away.

III

I returned to New York just in time to attend a receiver’s
sale of the books of Stone & Kimball. They had dissolved
partnership in Chicago a year or two before, and Kimball
after a year or two in New York had failed; and as he had
several of my books in his list, I was on hand to see what was
to be done. I found the handsome offices dismantled, the
furniture in disorder, and the officer (a consequential little
German) bustling about seeing that the goods were pro-
perly marked. Buyers from department stores and second-
hand bookshops were assembling like birds of prey—unclean,
sardonic, pitiless.

Kimball, who alluded to himself as “the corpse,” kept up
a show of cheerful youth, alluding to Stedman, Woodberry,
and others of his authors as “chief mourners,” which in
truth we were. Stedman was especially disgusted. Alert
attorneys were there to protect the interests of other and
more important creditors than those who had written the