

## THE MAN WHO MADE "LIFE"

*A Reminiscent Story of John Ames Mitchell*

BY THOMAS L. MASSON

John Ames Mitchell was the editor of "Life" from the time he launched it in 1883 up to the date of his death on the 29th of last June. Outside of the circle of his immediate associates, he was little known to the general public. He was not a public speaker. He rarely traveled. Aside from some dozen books that he wrote during this period as a relaxation, he confined himself strictly to his work. He was modest to a degree, instinctively edging away from any form of self-advertisement. Yet he undoubtedly belongs to that sharply restricted band of really great men who are so fortunate as to contribute a genuine idea to their day and generation.

"Life" was his own original creation. He started it against the advice of friends and experts. He continued it steadily according to his own ideas, and with a remarkable genius for encouragement and stimulation, he drew from those associated with him in his enterprise precisely the kind of things in them that he needed to carry out his idea, and rejected the rest without the slightest friction. He developed a school of artists. He was fearless in the execution of his purposes, broad in his sympathies, fair in all his dealings, and unhampered by tradition or precedent in his control of "Life". If anyone disagreed with him, he was always willing to give him a hearing. But his opinions were his own, and nobody had a ghost of a show to change them.

He abhorred any kind of trickery or sham and detected it intuitively. So far as "Life" was concerned, he scorned a consistent policy, and never hesitated to publish in the same issue diametrically opposite views on any public question, provided each of them was interesting. Nothing disturbed him. He had the unusual gift of exacting from others their utmost without their knowing it. None could move him against anyone to whom he had once given his trust.

His particular hobby was pictures, and he used to go over and select with great care many of the jokes that came into the "Life" office, setting aside those he thought would serve to illustrate. These pictures that were constantly coming into the office were always a subject for Mitchell's concern, and we would spend hours over them, trying to get the right text to go underneath. By a process of elimination, we would frequently reduce the caption to one magic word, which seemed to us at the moment to convey exactly the right meaning to the reader. Rejoicing prematurely over our masterpiece, we would discover the next day that we had refined away the text until, looking at it with a fresh eye, there was no meaning to it at all.

In his control of "Life" and its editorial policy, nothing ever disturbed him except possibly this text under the pictures. Once the printer placed three exclamation points after a cap-

tion, and I don't think Mitchell ever recovered from the memory of that typographical blasphemy. He had an artist's genuine horror of anything in the nature of unnatural display. In fact the superfluous, no matter where it was, always excited him. He visited the place where "Life" was printed, not more than three times. On the last occasion, some eight years ago, he was shown all the paper that went to make up one edition of his magazine, piled six or seven feet high. It took up almost one floor of the printer's loft and made an indelible impression upon him. For weeks after he would refer to the responsibility of printing so much paper, and how careful we should be not to print anything on it that was superfluous. He never liked to make "Life" larger, and was always for boiling it down, even when the advertising required that we add more pages.

He bought his pictures as he felt like it. He paid according to a system of his own, depending upon individual merit, and would never give the slightest attention to the number of pictures on hand. Sometimes this stock grew to immense proportions. This happened in 1907. During the panic of this year, when all the other magazines were retrenching, he suddenly came to me one day and said: "Now is the time for us to make a better paper", and in spite of the conditions, told me to make "Life" four pages larger and jam it with pictures. This was the only time he ever wanted to enlarge the paper.

Mitchell was born in New York City, January 17, 1845. His artistic tastes were early developed, as he used to draw for his own amusement when a lad. He got his education at Exeter, Lawrence Scientific School, and then at Harvard, where he took a scientific course, after which he went abroad to

study architecture. He returned to America in 1870 and practised architecture in Boston for about six years, at the end of which period he again visited Europe and studied painting at the Atelier Julian until 1881. He also studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. During his stay in this country, Mitchell had engaged in artistic and decorative work and had become a professional illustrator of books. On his return to France, he published several etchings in "L'Art" and received honorary mention at the Paris Exposition.

He had always been interested in black and white drawings, and feeling that there was a field for such art in the United States, he returned to this country and started "Life", which he founded as an artistic, humorous, and satirical journal on January 3, 1883. He used to declare that after publishing "Life" for nearly a year, he got more papers back than were printed each week. He had used up his money on an apparently fruitless venture. It became a question as to whether "Life" could continue. One day at luncheon he sat next to a group of men who were talking about the business of making a paper, and someone remarked that the more money that was put into a paper the more would come out of it. Mitchell went back to his office convinced by this chance remark that he would still continue to issue "Life". Afterward he learned that the man who had made the remark was Josh Billings. From that time on the tide turned, and "Life" steadily rose in power and influence.

Up to the day of his death Mitchell never relinquished his hold on his paper and never permitted anything else to distract his attention. Although eminently shrewd in business essentials, he carefully avoided mi-

nutiæ and the books he wrote were written as an extension of his work as editor.

He began writing in 1880 but up to 1894 his "Romance of the Moon", "The Last American", and "Life's' Fairy Tales" were short satires. In 1895 "Amos Judd" appeared—by far his best book. Some years later the Scribners reissued it in a popular edition and thirty-five or forty thousand copies were sold in a few months. This book is still being read by a large circle of readers. His next-best book is "The Pines of Lory", a charming love-story published in 1901. Others are "Gloria Victis", "The Villa Claudia", "The Silent War", "Pandora's Box", and "Drowsy". But none of these was so good as "Amos".

I told him once that my daughter was then reading "Amos" for the eleventh time, which brought from him something quietly humorous about my responsibility as a father. Most of his books he illustrated with decorative head and tail pieces. He was delighted with Balfour Ker's illustrations of "The Silent War" because the artist departed from the conventional and did not confine himself to the text.

Mitchell always found writing hard work. He wrote in a large hand on pads of white paper and labored over his sentences, writing and rewriting them. He liked best to write at night or at his country home. When at work on a book he would never discuss it. Indeed, he appeared to have no introspective leanings, none of that half-morbid strain which urges some of us to discuss our feelings with others. He believed that a writer should think out his story before committing it to paper. Grammar in its technical aspects never inspired him and he used to declare that he could not do the simplest sum in arithmetic. But in

business affairs he was nobody's fool. He was fascinated by astronomy. The immense distance of the star Arcturus from the earth aroused his imagination and he referred to it often. He was greatly taken with the wonders of electricity and when I announced one day that there were 1,700 electrons in an atom, he said he had just heard that himself and that it was great news.

The Cæsars interested him greatly and he once called my attention to the fact that Julius looked like a Connecticut farmer. But though he was influenced largely by Greek thought, especially in art, Greek literature as a whole did not appeal to him. He took home Roger's translation of Aristophanes to read, but it did not move him to rapture, as he would say. In page proofs his eye would light unerringly on some fault of taste, exciting his instant displeasure. He was finicky about verse and if a line did not scan, he would chuckle with distress. But a piece of obvious doggerel, or a faulty drawing, he would often accept if it proclaimed an original idea, merely remarking of it that the reader would forgive the imperfection and understand that we knew better. He was never thoroughly contented away from his paper and often said that when absent from the office all seemed like a dream. He had a remarkable capacity for work. Only three days before he died he said to me: "The only thing that ever really bothers me is to leave anything undone".

He had the most remarkable forgettery I ever knew. Useless knowledge never touched him. He had an innate and constitutional repugnance for anything obscure. Henry James was anathema, and the philosophers always excited his indignation. I once gave

him a work of Schopenhauer's, and he returned it to me a few days later with the dry remark that the man was either a fool or an idiot. It appeared impossible for him to read at length, because his mind was inventive and original, and he was always running away from the printed page to his own fancies. But he reveled in Plutarch and Shakespeare, and Napoleon was his favorite in biography. He thought Dickens's "Tale of Two Cities" the best novel ever written. He loved France. Paris, the foster-mother of his youth, always held him in its thrall. When the war came on in 1914, his rage at the Germans was beyond any words to express. And as the weeks wore on into years and America failed to respond to the call of France, his sense of justice was unutterably stirred. He never forgave the administration for its neutral policy, and no thought of material interest ever stood between him and his sense of right. And he was generally right on fundamentals.

Having no children of his own, he loved those belonging to others, and "Life's" Fresh Air Farm is an enduring monument to this beautiful trait. Upon one occasion I visited him, coming fresh from my own home where children were running loose with the constant hubbub of young folks. As I opened his door I said unthinkingly: "How silent your house is". This made an indelible impression upon him and for years after he referred to it.

Mitchell's benefactions extended into all sorts of out of the way places, but none ever knew about them. Human and animal distress of any sort always excited his sympathy. His attitude about vivisection was not fully understood even by some of his close friends. It was always tempered

by editorial sense which resolutely refused to go into long explanations. He wrote scarcely anything for "Life" except paragraphs showing up the cruelty of vivisection. His method was ridicule and satire, and ridicule and satire must be brief, to the point. It was not necessary, as he often declared to me, to state that he did not believe all doctors cruel. It was sufficient for him to call attention to an abuse which undoubtedly exists, and to do this in his own manner. Besides, he was right. From the broad human standpoint it is much more important to the human race that the average standard of sentiment of beauty, of altruism, of common love for one's fellow creatures shall constantly be developed and raised, than it is that a few individuals in each generation shall apparently by scientific methods be saved a few years of life. Mitchell infuriated the doctors because he scorned their statistics and kept unflinchingly to his own ground. The man who came to him with the constantly recurring question, "What would you do if it were your own child?" was received with unfailing courtesy, but never got anywhere. Mitchell believed in justice, in charity, in honesty, in truth, in integrity, and in form rather than in substance. His artistic sense, pervading his whole personality, made it inevitable that he should care most for how a thing was done rather than for the thing itself. Superficialities never tempted him. He was not led astray by bald statements. His most remarkable characteristic was that, in an age almost purely commercial and quite largely material, he unerringly kept himself pure from these influences. One of his most beautiful traits was his playful courtesy toward those who totally misunderstood him. He would even

go so far as to defend them, particularly if the method used against him was such as to excite his admiration on its merits.

He developed his own school of artists by a system of encouragement that was unique. He never flattered, but he would invariably select some good quality in those who served him and define it. Thus we all had to live up to the reputations he had fastened upon us, but he never made the mistake of flattering anyone who had not the capacity for improvement in that particular direction. The practical result was that Mitchell, by this apparently simple process, was constantly bringing out latent talent, constantly making others better. He

never discharged anyone. He never gave anyone up, no matter how hopeless he might seem. This quality of praise gave him the power to criticize, and this with all the force of just criticism. But above all, Mitchell was reliable. To be on hand at the appointed time with him was not so much a religion as an artistic verity.

One of "Life's" artists told me that he came into Mitchell's office once with a picture. Mitchell studied it for a moment and said: "That is not the best thing you ever did in your life". The artist replied that he really thought it was, if not the best, one of the best. "Well if you feel that way about it", replied Mitchell, "I'll take it."

## HAMLET AND THE DEMON

BY MOREBY ACKLOM

The other evening it was my privilege to sit modestly silent while those great literary savants, Professor Emilie Puffer, the most ladylike Shakespeare lecturer on the Chautauqua Circuit, and Doctor Mamie Luella Dimplechin, Dean of the Department of Literary Exegesis in the Woman's Rights University of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, President of the Associated Thursday Afternoon Tea and Talk Clubs of the Middle West, etc., etc. (see "Who's Who in America" for the rest of it), discussed "the riddle" of Hamlet, with especial reference to the question whether the gloomy prince was intended by the author to be insane, or to be merely pretending insanity for his own purposes.

The disputation was of absorbing interest—to the disputers. In fact,

so stimulating did each find her own arguments and so pleased were both with the manner and method of their presentation that the dialogue tended to evolve into two fluent monologues, each pioneer wishing to give the other as full an opportunity as possible to admire sound scholarship combined with the highest development of drawing-room oratory.

I must confess to finding myself a little dazzled by my attempt to follow two lines of argument at once, the more so as the high-sounding authorities so glibly quoted in such mellifluous tones were all strangers to me, while in the matter of editions and texts and folios and quartos and scripts and references and so forth and such like, I discovered that I was so hopelessly ignorant as to be merely