

McTEAGUE

BY FRANK NORRIS

INTRODUCTION BY HENRY S. PANCOAST



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Dedicated to
L. E. GATES
OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

It is hardly possible to read a novel by Frank Norris—especially if that novel chance to be “McTeague,” “The Octopus,” or “The Pit”—without receiving a very distinct and permanent impression of the man and his work. His books may stimulate or depress us; they may stir us to an intense admiration or to an intense dislike, but in either case we are sure that these books are not negative or negligible. We find, too, that they have a curious staying power, so that we cannot forget them even if we would. In an age when novels are almost as common and only less ephemeral than newspapers, when multitudes find in them only a temporary amusement or a mental sedative, this persistent power of Norris’s best books is, in itself, both extraordinary and significant. Norris’s place in our literature is still undetermined; but it is not unreasonable to suppose that novels which have demonstrated this unusual staying-power in the case of the individual reader, may possess that mysterious vitality which will keep them alive for future generations.

A good book, in Milton’s familiar phrase, is “the precious life-blood of a master-spirit.” The life that throbs in Norris’s books is but a part of his own youthful, eager, intense vitality treasured up in print for “a life beyond life.” In reading these books our attention is caught and held because we feel that we are in the presence of a memorable personality—vigorous, mas-

culine, perhaps almost uncomfortably aggressive. Here, we say, is a man who has nothing of the Laodicean in his disposition, a man of positive convictions and transparent sincerity, who has tried to look at life frankly and honestly report the results of his search. For truth-telling with Norris was more than a mere surface accuracy in detail; it was not merely a matter of technique, it was a matter of conscience; it was the fundamental principle of his art. Profoundly impressed by the influence and the social importance of the novel as "the great expression of modern life," Norris despised the novelist who held out the hat for pennies, or wrote only to amuse; he felt the obligations and solemn responsibilities of his office as the anointed teacher of the masses. He himself has confided to us his creed and his aims. "But the novelist to-day is the one who reaches the greatest audience. Right or wrong, the People turn to him the moment he speaks, and what he says they believe. . . . Is it not in Heaven's name essential that the people hear, not a lie, but the Truth?" So, he concludes, the novelist should address himself to his task "with earnestness, with soberness, with a sense of his limitations, and with all the abiding sincerity that by the favour and mercy of the gods may be his."

Earnestness and sincerity are great qualities, but the value of any impression of life depends upon the insight as well as upon the honesty of the observer; it is more or less modified by his peculiar field of observation and almost insensibly affected by the mental atmosphere of his time. It is true, that on some writers external and contemporary influences may be comparatively slight. We may find it hard, for instance, to

reconcile the genius of Keats or of Shelley with their origin and their immediate surroundings, but Norris was not so much a diviner as an observer, he saw life from a certain angle, and his view of truth was unconsciously and subtly modified by the influences of his place and time. He told the truth as he saw it; he worked with the materials which the hour and the place supplied, and in these facts we find both his limitation and one source of his strength.

How, then, did time and place equip him for his task? He was born in Chicago in 1870; in the metropolis of our latter-day America; the eager, tense, money-making and money-loving centre of the rich Middle-West. In the seventies, the day of the gentle-hearted, romantic Longfellow was nearly over, the supremacy in letters was slowly passing from New England, and a hardy, unkempt literature, emancipated from English domination, was just rising in the West under the leadership of Bret Harte and Mark Twain. Fifteen years were passed in Chicago, the formative, crucial years of a boy's life, and then in 1885, the Norris family moved to San Francisco, a city created by the love of gold, the polyglot and conglomerate capital of a newer and a remoter West. At seventeen, or thereabout, Norris was an art student in Paris; at nineteen he was at home again, studying at the University of California, going East, after his graduation in 1894, to take a post-graduate course in literature at Harvard. As early as 1889, just after his return from Paris, his first published article appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. After he left Harvard, he was war correspondent in South Africa, and on his re-

turn to San Francisco he passed, like Condry Rivers in "Blix," from journalism to literature.

The suggestiveness of these facts, even in so bare an outline of Norris's human experience, is too plain to be mistaken. That he drew largely upon his own observation and personal experience must be evident to every careful reader of his books. He takes us into the throbbing financial centres of his native Chicago in "The Pit," to Harvard in "Vandover and the Brute," to San Francisco in such stories as "Moran and the Lady Letty," "Blix," and "McTeague." But this is not all. It is not a light undertaking to tell the truth about life, and there were many things in Norris's experience which tended to concentrate his attention on certain aspects of life, and led him to interpret the riddle of existence from a too exclusively modern point of view. Life had been revealed to him as it was in two ultra-modern, intensely commercial, and highly prosperous Western cities, where there was much that was crude, blatant, and vulgar, unsoftened and unsteadied by the gracious influences of a long past. There was no background; no vague, mysterious distance. Like Nature herself, in that clear, restless, Western atmosphere, everything showed glittering and distinct, with sharp, hard outlines. And even if we add to this Norris's comparatively brief experiences in Paris and at Harvard, there is still something lacking; there is still that self-assured and pervading modernness, weak in spiritual apprehension, little fitted to nourish reverence, humility, and awe.

Beyond this, and in some ways confirming and re-enforcing it, was the impalpable but pervasive atmosphere of the time. Life may be seen *spiritually*, as

the poet sees it, or it may be seen *physically* as the scientist sees it. The poet searches for the eternal reality below the shifting and illusory surface; the scientist seeks for truth in the demonstrable, objective fact. When Norris was growing up there was a tendency to interpret life physically, and certain novelists, in the sacred name of truth, thrust forward into undue prominence the more brutal and primitive elements in man. Not long before, it had been the fashion in England to write about high life, and the poor servant girl loved to read of Dukes and Duchesses by the light of her farthing dip, now it became the fashion to write about low life, and to seek for truth in the jail or the workhouse, the uncharted wilderness, or the slums. This revival of the primitive declared itself, too, in books of adventure, in which the ultra-civilized reader turned his back on the confines of the familiar, and refreshed his imagination with Homeric battles in the remotest and obscurest regions of the earth. For these were the days of Zola, of Stevenson, of Rider Haggard, and of Kipling, "the little spectacted colonial" as Norris called him, "to whose song we must all listen, and to whose pipe we must all dance." We have but to remember Norris's fondness for crude, primitive characters, McTeague and the atavistic hero of "A Man's Woman," we have but to recall his careful presentation of repulsive details, his emphasis on the brutal and substantial, his apparently incongruous vein of romance and adventure, to appreciate the potency of those elusive influences which it is easier to suggest than to define.

These influences of place and time had their part in the making of "McTeague," the first of Norris's novels

to gain him a hearing and the first to reveal his characteristic power. McTeague is a simple, unsuspecting creature; a crude, common man, strong in body, untaught and sluggish in mind. He is not vicious, he is merely undeveloped and inert. He loves bodily ease. Something strong, primitive, brutal, survives in him, older and more fundamental than civilization. He has come to San Francisco from the ruder life of the mines; at the end of the story, flying from civilization, he seeks safety beyond its borders. In the wilderness he shares the brute's strange intuitive prescience of impending danger. So Norris, like Carlyle, and Whitman, reinforces, in his own fashion, the words of King Lear: "Off, off you lendings!—unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art."

Yet McTeague, primitive as he is, has in him glimmerings of something beyond, that suggest a capacity for growth. He solaces himself with a concertina upon which he can play six lugubrious airs; he clings fondly to his stone pug-dog, the friend of his boyhood; most of all he loves his canary in its gilt cage. He has his pathetic little ambition. He longs to have "a huge gilded tooth" which shall serve as a gorgeous sign for his Dental Parlors.

Twice in his life a woman's influence proves stronger than McTeague's inert acquiescence in his condition. His mother pushes him out from the mines to become a dentist; his marriage with Trina does something to widen his outlook and mitigate the crude ugliness of his surroundings. But his chance of progress, such as it was, is ruined by the greed for money, which dominates the chief actors in his little world. *The love of money is the root of all evil*—this teaching

supplies the motive for the whole story and elevates what otherwise might have been but a vulgar little drama of the commonplace to the dignity of a tragedy. There is Maria Macapa, with her passion for collecting "junk" and her mythical service of gold plate, that sang when you struck it "sweeter'n church bells, an' clearer." There is Zerkow, "groping hourly in the muck-heap of the city for gold, gold, gold." There, too, is Trina, with her pathetically small nature, whose love of saving—an inheritance from her thrifty peasant ancestry—grows into a passion, until every interest and affection is sacrificed to the miser's delight in the mere sense of possession. Once, affection prompts Trina to help her husband out of her savings, but her avarice proves stronger than her love.

"Trina looked longingly at the ten broad pieces in her hand. Then suddenly all her intuitive desire for saving, her instinct of hoarding, her love of money for the money's sake, were strong within her. 'No, no, no,' she said, 'I can't do it. It may be mean but I can't help it. It's stronger than I'."

This love of gold forms, as it were, the *hubris* of the tragedy of McTeague and calls down the inevitable Nemesis. It causes the murder of Maria Macapa and of Trina; it wrecks McTeague, soul and body; it kills Marcus Schouler. Moreover, Schouler's hatred of McTeague, the source of the whole tragedy, springs from his disappointment in losing Trina's legacy from the fact that in him avarice is stronger than love or friendship.

In this sordid, sombre story, one restricted aspect of life is presented with painstaking directness and with extraordinary power. The ugliness and crudity of our civilization are remorselessly obtruded. Vulgarities,

bad smells, close air, gutters, refuse—all that offends us is relentlessly forced upon our senses, while the things that redeem and transfigure life are subordinated or ignored. And yet “McTeague” is far more than a minute study of life and crime in the San Francisco slums. The stage may seem narrow, the actors clownish and vulgar, but the theme is treated with an epic breadth and largeness of conception that lifts an apparently commonplace story into the high levels of great art. Each sordid detail is selected with the instinct of the artist and realistic exactness is employed only as a means to a definite end. This epic largeness of handling, this masculine grasp and vigor, are characteristic of Norris. Already present in “McTeague” they are shown more fully in those later masterpieces “The Octopus” and “The Pit.”

Norris died at thirty-two; compressing an amazing amount of work and effort into a few strenuous years. We need not speculate on what he might have done: we may be grateful for what he actually accomplished. We must remember that he did not aim to amuse us; he did not seek to create a thing of beauty; he tried to tell us the truth about life. He shows us life as he saw it, presenting it with the dash, vigor, and cocksureness of a strong and somewhat youthful observer. He does not tell us the whole truth, for the world is not altogether unlovely, self-sacrifice is as real as selfishness, and love is even stronger than hate, but his report is honest and manly. He had the instinct of the artist, and his greater books are among the few American novels which we should not neglect and which we cannot easily forget.

HENRY S. PANCOAST.

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I.

It was Sunday, and, according to his custom on that day, McTeague took his dinner at two in the afternoon at the car conductors' coffee-joint on Polk Street. He had a thick gray soup; heavy, underdone meat, very hot, on a cold plate; two kinds of vegetables; and a sort of suet pudding, full of strong butter and sugar. On his way back to his office, one block above, he stopped at Joe Frenna's saloon and bought a pitcher of steam beer. It was his habit to leave the pitcher there on his way to dinner.

Once in his office, or, as he called it on his sign-board, "Dental Parlors," he took off his coat and shoes, unbuttoned his vest, and, having crammed his little stove full of coke, lay back in his operating chair at the bay window, reading the paper, drinking his beer, and smoking his huge porcelain pipe while his food digested; crop-full, stupid, and warm. By and by, gorged with steam beer, and overcome by the heat of the room, the cheap tobacco, and the effects of his heavy meal, he dropped off to sleep. Late in the afternoon his canary bird, in its gilt cage just over his head, began to sing. He woke slowly, finished the rest of his beer—very flat and

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stale by this time—and taking down his concertina from the book-case, where in week days it kept the company of seven volumes of “Allen’s Practical Dentist,” played upon it some half-dozen very mournful airs.

McTeague looked forward to these Sunday afternoons as a period of relaxation and enjoyment. He invariably spent them in the same fashion. These were his only pleasures—to eat, to smoke, to sleep, and to play upon his concertina.

The six lugubrious airs that he knew, always carried him back to the time when he was a car-boy at the Big Dipper Mine in Placer County, ten years before. He remembered the years he had spent there trundling the heavy cars of ore in and out of the tunnel under the direction of his father. For thirteen days of each fortnight his father was a steady, hard-working shift-boss of the mine. Every other Sunday he became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy with alcohol.

McTeague remembered his mother, too, who, with the help of the Chinaman, cooked for forty miners. She was an overworked drudge, fiery and energetic for all that, filled with the one idea of having her son rise in life and enter a profession. The chance had come at last when the father died, corroded with alcohol, collapsing in a few hours. Two or three years later a travelling dentist visited the mine and put up his tent near the bunk-house. He was more or less of a charlatan, but he fired Mrs. McTeague’s ambition, and young McTeague went away with him to learn his profession. He had learnt it after a fashion, mostly by watching the

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charlatan operate. He had read many of the necessary books, but he was too hopelessly stupid to get much benefit from them.

Then one day at San Francisco had come the news of his mother's death; she had left him some money—not much, but enough to set him up in business; so he had cut loose from the charlatan and had opened his "Dental Parlors" on Polk Street, an "accommodation street" of small shops in the residence quarter of the town. Here he had slowly collected a clientele of butcher boys, shop girls, drug clerks, and car conductors. He made but few acquaintances. Polk Street called him the "Doctor" and spoke of his enormous strength. For McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground; moving his immense limbs, heavy with ropes of muscle, slowly, ponderously. His hands were enormous, red, and covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair; they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vises, the hands of the old-time car-boy. Often he dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and finger. His head was square-cut, angular; the jaw salient, like that of the carnivora.

McTeague's mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish. Yet there was nothing vicious about the man. Altogether he suggested the draught horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient.

When he opened his "Dental Parlors," he felt that his life was a success, that he could hope for nothing better. In spite of the name, there was but

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one room. It was a corner room on the second floor over the branch post-office, and faced the street. McTeague made it do for a bedroom as well, sleeping on the big bed-lounge against the wall opposite the window. There was a washstand behind the screen in the corner where he manufactured his moulds. In the round bay window were his operating chair, his dental engine, and the movable rack on which he laid out his instruments. Three chairs, a bargain at the second-hand store, ranged themselves against the wall with military precision underneath a steel engraving of the court of Lorenzo de' Medici, which he had bought because there were a great many figures in it for the money. Over the bed-lounge hung a rifle manufacturer's advertisement calendar which he never used. The other ornaments were a small marble-topped centre table covered with back numbers of "The American System of Dentistry," a stone pug dog sitting before the little stove, and a thermometer. A stand of shelves occupied one corner, filled with the seven volumes of "Allen's Practical Dentist." On the top shelf McTeague kept his concertina and a bag of bird seed for the canary. The whole place exhaled a mingled odor of bedding, creosote, and ether.

But for one thing, McTeague would have been perfectly contented. Just outside his window was his signboard—a modest affair—that read: "Doctor McTeague. Dental Parlors. Gas Given"; but that was all. It was his ambition, his dream, to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive. He would have it

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some day, on that he was resolved; but as yet such a thing was far beyond his means.

When he had finished the last of his beer, McTeague slowly wiped his lips and huge yellow mustache with the side of his hand. Bull-like, he heaved himself laboriously up, and, going to the window, stood looking down into the street.

The street never failed to interest him. It was one of those cross streets peculiar to Western cities, situated in the heart of the residence quarter, but occupied by small tradespeople who lived in the rooms above their shops. There were corner drug stores with huge jars of red, yellow, and green liquids in their windows, very brave and gay; stationers' stores, where illustrated weeklies were tacked upon bulletin boards; barber shops with cigar stands in their vestibules; sad-looking plumbers' offices; cheap restaurants, in whose windows one saw piles of unopened oysters weighted down by cubes of ice, and china pigs and cows knee deep in layers of white beans. At one end of the street McTeague could see the huge power-house of the cable line. Immediately opposite him was a great market; while farther on, over the chimney stacks of the intervening houses, the glass roof of some huge public baths glittered like crystal in the afternoon sun. Underneath him the branch post-office was opening its doors, as was its custom between two and three o'clock on Sunday afternoons. An acrid odor of ink rose upward to him. Occasionally a cable car passed, trundling heavily, with a strident whirring of jostled glass windows.

On week days the street was very lively. It woke

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to its work about seven o'clock, at the time when the newsboys made their appearance together with the day laborers. The laborers went trudging past in a straggling file—plumbers' apprentices, their pockets stuffed with sections of lead pipe, tweezers, and pliers; carpenters, carrying nothing but their little pasteboard lunch baskets painted to imitate leather; gangs of street workers, their overalls soiled with yellow clay, their picks and long-handled shovels over their shoulders; plasterers, spotted with lime from head to foot. This little army of workers, tramping steadily in one direction, met and mingled with other toilers of a different description—conductors and "swing men" of the cable company going on duty; heavy-eyed night clerks from the drug stores on their way home to sleep; roundsmen returning to the precinct police station to make their night report, and Chinese market gardeners teetering past under their heavy baskets. The cable cars began to fill up; all along the street could be seen the shop keepers taking down their shutters.

Between seven and eight the street breakfasted. Now and then a waiter from one of the cheap restaurants crossed from one sidewalk to the other, balancing on one palm a tray covered with a napkin. Everywhere was the smell of coffee and of frying steaks. A little later, following in the path of the day laborers, came the clerks and shop girls, dressed with a certain cheap smartness, always in a hurry, glancing apprehensively at the power-house clock. Their employers followed an hour or so later—on the cable cars for the most part—whiskered gentlemen with huge stomachs, reading the morning