RINEHART EDITIONS

McTeague

Frank Norris

Introduction by Carvel Collins

McTEAGUE

A Story of San Francisco

FRANK NORRIS

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
CARVEL COLLINS

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Dedicated to

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INTRODUCTION

Whatever their differences when defining the term, critics and historians agree that Naturalism has been a significant force in American literature during the past fifty years, and that *McTeague* was a pioneer American Naturalistic novel. The book, which Norris began writing in 1892 or 1893 and published in 1899, has been called "a landmark"; America's "first important Naturalistic novel"; the work from which the "last great break in American literary form can be dated." Howells thought *McTeague* brought a new mode into American literature with the "effect of a blizzard."

Many earlier American works of fiction had pointed toward Naturalism. And Stephen Crane's Naturalistic short novel *Maggie* had been published six years before *McTeague*. But because of the greater extent to which *McTeague* imported into the United States the attitudes and devices of European Naturalism and because of its greater length and force, it outweighed *Maggie* as a pioneering work. And despite its numerous weaknesses *McTeague* is the aesthetic superior of *Maggie* and deserves Alfred Kazin's remark that it is "one of the great works of the modern American imagination."

Literary Naturalism, whose chief vehicle has been the novel, was given its name by Zola. He said that it was, like experimental science, a "return to nature." Though it cannot be defined precisely, there is agreement about some of its elements. Those novels accepted as most orthodox in their Naturalism are materialistic. They are deterministic, depicting man driven by forces outside himself over which he has no control. And they are in the main pessimistic.

At its beginning Naturalism owed much to the works of Balzac and Stendhal, but the first novels recognized as fully Naturalistic

were those written after the middle of the nineteenth century by Flaubert, the brothers Goncourt, Daudet, Maupassant, and Zola. They must have written their grim and violent fiction partly out of personal hurt and out of despair in a time of general disillusionment and also partly in reaction against the brighter excesses of romantic literature, but most of these men believed that it was to the rapidly expanding science of their time that they owed whatever was Naturalistic in their art. They said they were trying to write "the Truth," and to do that were borrowing from science not only its materialism and determinism but its detachment, unmorality, direct observation, and "frank acceptance and depicting of the thing as it is." At the start of the movement many Naturalists felt they could learn most from the natural sciences, especially biology; and they considered heredity the major force controlling man. Later they turned more often to the social sciences for whatever formal theory they felt they required, their works reflecting this change by an increased respect for the shaping force of environment.

In their emphasis on these overwhelming forces which drive mankind, Naturalists usually have depicted life in the lower levels of society. Especially interested in "the brute within," they often have chosen as central characters people with little intellect but remarkable physical qualities—examples are Zola's Nana and Norris's McTeague—or people driven by oversimplified psychological defects, such as Trina McTeague, with her masochism and morbid parsimony. This strong emphasis on incompetents and the forces which cause them to degenerate has made grotesques of many characters in Naturalistic fiction. Zola, who seems to have had faith in future reform despite the depth of his pessimism concerning the present, excused his school's low scenes and grotesque characters by saying that Naturalists like scientists must be willing to stir up "the fetid" in unpleasant places because, as the physiologist Claud Bernard had written, ultimate knowledge is a "superb salon, flooded with light, which you can only reach by passing through a long and nauseating kitchen."

In dealing with this sordid subject matter, the Naturalists

have made a main element of their method the collection of masses of detail, an extension of Balzac's method intensified by their respect for experimental science. After drawing on whatever store of useful technicalities their own experiences furnish—Jack London, the Alaskan gold rush; James T. Farrell, the life near Chicago's Sixty-third Street—the Naturalists have depended on research, the accuracy of which they have been willing to go to great lengths to ensure. Zola prepared a careful record of the technical facts of railroading for *La Bête humaine,* of coal mining for *Germinal,* of the demimonde for *Nana.* Norris studied the Harvard Library's copy of *A Text-book of Operative Dentistry* so he could load *McTeague* with the dental minutiae of bud-burrs and gutta-percha. Throughout, the Naturalists' most characteristic tool has been the notebook.

Desiring to be "scientific" and detached, yet motivated in part by outraged moralism, the Naturalists have made irony almost as essential a part of their method as the massing of detail. Not wanting to enter into their novels as a chorus voicing comments, they have been able to let their anger and bewilderment find expression through an ironic juxtaposition of events, described with apparent detachment.

In his discussion of the Naturalists' method, Zola said that the novelist "should operate on the characters, the passions, on the human and social data, in the same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on inanimate beings." Partly as a result of this "experimental method"—whether or not they ever have achieved it—most Naturalists have concentrated on man's external rather than his internal world. This concentration has done much to encourage the current movement of fiction away from Naturalism. Writers and critics in recent years, with greater knowledge of psychology, increased familiarity with symbolism, and strong compulsions toward rediscovery of "myth" in their innumerable interpretations of that term, have come to consider Naturalistic fiction not so interesting as fiction less confined to externals. Yet Naturalism was influential in helping to bring literature to a closer, freer examination of reality. And by writing *McTeague* when this mode

was not yet established here, Frank Norris performed a service for literature in America.

Norris was born in Chicago in 1870 and at the age of fifteen moved to San Francisco. His father was a successful jeweler; his mother, a former teacher and actress. He showed some talent for drawing; so his family took him to Paris in 1887, where he attended the Atelier Julien. After a time the rest of the family returned to California, leaving him to continue his art training, which he began to neglect in favor of writing romantic chivalric novels. When his father learned of this he ordered the boy home.

Back in San Francisco after two years in Paris, Norris spent several months preparing to enter the University of California and writing a long romantic poem, *Yvernelle,* which his mother arranged to have privately and sumptuously published. In the University Norris found his courses uninteresting, but he took part in extracurricular activities with the boyish enthusiasm which was to remain his most marked characteristic. He contributed to the college magazines and sold stories to the San Francisco *Wave,* the *Argonaut,* and the *Overland Monthly.* His biographer reports that people who knew Norris in college remembered him as often carrying copies of French editions of Zola's novels and always willing to give a passionate defense of that leading Naturalist. In Zola's feeling for melodrama, his love of large canvasses, and his massing of grim documentation, Norris found the combination his temperament demanded. In the years to come he would jokingly sign some of his letters "The Boy Zola."

While Norris was in the University his parents were divorced. His father remarried and Norris found himself no longer the potential heir to a fortune. His biographer feels that this withdrawal of large financial expectations, coupled with the impact of Zola's novels, turned Norris's attention to the life of the underprivileged. In Naturalist fashion he began to record details of life in the poorer sections of San Francisco. In 1892 or 1893 he started to write *McTeague.*

When his four years at the University of California ended in

1894, he and his mother and brother moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, so that Norris could enroll at Harvard and take a writing course. Under the encouragement of his instructor, Lewis E. Gates, to whom Norris later dedicated the novel, he continued to work on *McTeague* until he finished the episode of Trina's murder. He then apparently had difficulty in disposing of the murderer and put the manuscript aside to write *Vandover and the Brute*, another Naturalistic novel, describing the degeneration of a young California artist. Norris did not quite complete *Vandover* before he put it aside; after his death his brother prepared it for publication in 1914 by adding a few hundred words and eliminating a chapter the publishers thought censorable.

After one year at Harvard, Norris went to South Africa to write travel letters for a newspaper. Jameson's Raid interfered with his plan and he soon returned to California, to become assistant editor of the San Francisco *Wave*. The sketches, stories, and serials he contributed to that weekly during his two years on the staff show a fluctuation between the formulas of Kipling and Zola. His essays on literary theory in the *Wave*—like his later essays which were collected in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*—do not seem to contain any clear and usable ideas, though they are of considerable historical interest.

Late in 1897, granted leave from the *Wave* to complete *McTeague*, Norris went into the Sierras to the Big Dipper Mine. When he returned to San Francisco a few weeks later the novel was finished, its final three chapters bearing the stamp of the region in which he wrote them. He submitted the manuscript to publishers without success, meanwhile writing *Moran of the Lady Letty*, which was accepted as a serial for the *Wave*. S. S. McClure, of *McClure's Magazine*, read the early installments of that astonishing romantic tale with its modern Viking of a heroine and bought it for publication by his syndicate. When he also invited Norris to come to New York to join his staff, Norris accepted.

After working for McClure a few weeks and finishing a semi-autobiographical novel, *Blix*, Norris went to Cuba as a correspondent in the Spanish-American War. Back in New York late in

1898 he began work as a manuscript reader for the recently formed house of Doubleday, McClure & Company.

Finally, in February, 1899, at least six years after Norris had begun it, *McTeague* was published. With its appearance he received more attention, favorable and unfavorable, than *Moran* had brought him. Most encouraging was a long and complimentary review by Howells, recognizing *McTeague* as an important step in the "expansion in American fiction."

Within a few weeks of the publication of *McTeague* Norris finished *A Man's Woman,* which even he considered "slovenly." With these books off his hands, he immediately formed plans for a trilogy about wheat—the first volume, *The Octopus,* to be set in the San Joaquin Valley. He went to California in order to "study the whole thing *on the ground,*" and soon reported that facts about wheat farming were "piling up B I G." After a few months he returned to New York ready to write the novel. Remembering the inadequacies of *Moran* and *A Man's Woman,* he decided to go back "*definitely* now to the style of *McTeague*" and make the wheat trilogy "straight naturalism with all the guts I can get into it."

Doubleday, McClure had become Doubleday, Page; and in January, 1900, the new firm hired Norris as a special manuscript reader. With the increased salary of his new position he was at last able to marry Jeannette Black, to whom he had been engaged for two years. That summer when Dreiser, one year Norris's junior, submitted to Doubleday the manuscript of *Sister Carrie,* Norris at once recognized the quality of that Naturalistic work and became its indefatigable defender when the self-imposed censorship of the publishers prevented its regular distribution.

The Octopus came out early in 1901 and was an immediate success despite defects which in recent years have lowered it in critical estimation. Norris then set about the preliminary work for his trilogy's second volume, *The Pit,* moving to Chicago where he could study the grain market at first hand. But the writing was a struggle because he did not come to feel at home with this new

subject, nor was his intention clear enough to make *The Pit* a good book. When he had finished it he began to plan the third volume, *The Wolf*, and even projected another trilogy—one novel for each day of the Battle of Gettysburg.

Norris had returned to San Francisco. *The Pit* had just started to appear as a serial in the *Saturday Evening Post*, from which it was to go on to be the best-selling novel of the following year. And he had completed plans for a voyage across the Pacific to gather material for *The Wolf*. Suddenly he died of appendicitis, in October, 1902.

Since his death, Frank Norris's fiction has dropped to a considerably lower position in the American literary hierarchy than it held in the last years of his life. And there has been a re-evaluation of his books in relation to each other, with the result that *McTeague* has gained favor until in the opinion of many it is his best.

The novel records the destruction of an innocent. Though Norris often seems either completely detached from or snobbishly contemptuous of McTeague, on the whole he presents him with sympathy as lonely and put-upon. When McTeague was a youth at the Big Dipper Mine he led a menial life for which he was fitted by great strength and small intellect. His tendency to violence when drunk—presented as an inheritance from his father, in the oversimplified biology of the Naturalists—he had admirably learned to control by avoiding whiskey entirely. He could have lived on at the mine in some content.

But his mother's ambition for her son to "better himself" forced McTeague to leave the mountains and eventually set up his modest dental office in San Francisco. There in what passed for civilization on Polk Street he retained some primitive contentment, with his huge, cheap meals and his steam beer and concertina Sundays.

When Trina entered his life and, like his mother, set about improving him, he developed a taste for better clothing and better food, thus taking one more step away from the life of "the old-time car-boy" of the Big Dipper Mine. So far McTeague's life

seems by conventional measures to be a progress, and it seems so to him when, his dreams fulfilled, he at last owns a dentist's sign, the enormous golden Tooth.

But the trap has already closed on McTeague, as the symbol in the last line of Chapter V points out a little too obviously. Ironically, on the day McTeague uncrates the Tooth, he and Marcus, who is enraged because he has relinquished Trina's money to McTeague, are irrevocably set at odds and McTeague's destruction becomes inevitable. When Marcus arranges for him to be barred from practice, the dentist becomes entirely vulnerable to Trina's avarice. Finally, on a night when he is especially depressed by fatigue and exposure brought on by her morbid refusal to give him car fare, McTeague begins to drink and the latent viciousness inherited from his father starts to dominate his life. Later he steals from Trina and after the money is gone he returns to beg. When Trina refuses him help, his last remaining self-control slips away and he kills her.

Escaped from civilization and back at the Big Dipper Mine, McTeague regains the contentment of his boyhood. "The life pleased the dentist beyond words. The still, colossal mountains took him back again . . ." But the city pursues him for his crime, and he flees. In the mountains to the south, ironically, he discovers a rich vein of the metal for which Marcus has betrayed him and Trina has driven him to murder. But the pursuit begun in the city forces him on, to final destruction.

Looked at in this oversimplification, the novel, like much Naturalism, is moralistic. The theme of its moralizing is ancient: civilization is corrupt and its vice corrupts and destroys a man who could have remained innocent in more simple surroundings. Norris's development of this theme in *McTeague* seems to owe much to an amalgamation of the Naturalism he borrowed from Europe with the primitivism which was characteristic of his place and time. Such essays of his as "The Frontier Gone at Last" and "A Neglected Epic" and his first wheat novel clearly show that Norris held many ideas or prejudices in common with the primitivist Frederick Jackson Turner, whose theory of the frontier was

published in 1894 and had its first wave of popularity during the years Norris wrote. Among these ideas was the oversimplification which locates good in the country and evil in town. This idea was already at work in *McTeague*. The dentist from the mountains is the only one of the foreground characters not ruled by avarice, if we exclude the two sentimental aged lovers. Gold appears throughout the book in the familiar Naturalistic use of a dominating symbol; but when it is associated with McTeague it does not suggest that he has avarice but that he has sensitivity and aspiration, very crude, of course, but meant to be somewhat touching. He yearns for the huge Tooth, the golden molar, but only as a symbol of his apparently successful struggle upward from the mine to professional standing in city life. The gold in his office, which the avaricious Maria often steals and sells to the gold-mad junk dealer, is to McTeague a dental material which he delights to shape for use in his profession. He takes the money from Trina's trunk because he is angry for the depths to which her avarice has brought them and because he wants to spend it—which he promptly does. And he does not kill Trina out of avarice for her golden lottery prize but for revenge.

Norris seems to have made McTeague's tragedy not so much his bad heritage as the destruction of his control over that heritage. In Chapter VIII when Marcus has knocked McTeague's pipe from his mouth the published version reads (page 106 of this edition): "McTeague rose to his feet, his eyes wide. But as yet he was not angry, only surprised . . . Why had Marcus broken his pipe? What did it all mean, anyway?" But in the manuscript before revision* Norris at some length showed McTeague going wild after Marcus broke his pipe:

> The next second McTeague was as a man transformed, patient and good natured enough under ordinary circumstances he was nevertheless capable of those terrible unwonted spasms of fury . . . At once he seemed to grow larger . . . his eyes

* A fragment of fourteen pages of the manuscript of *McTeague* has been preserved, in Harvard University's Houghton Library. It is quoted here by kind permission of the Librarian.

> contracted and were shot with blood while his teeth ground upon one another with a horrid rasping sound. His anger was the wild blind rage of a *berserker* . . . blind, deaf, insensate. . . . For the fraction of a second the two men faced each other, lashed into a bestial wrath . . . there was nothing human in it. It was the rage of two brutes, the human animal suddenly leaping to life snarling and triumphant. . . . McTeague bore down upon him . . .

Under this attack Marcus, with some reason, threw his knife. Then the unrevised version went on to say:

> A trickle of blood was running from McTeague's nose, and the whites of his eyes were pink. The sudden explosion of passion had driven the blood to his head with so sudden a spurt that the skin seemed nigh to bursting .

Presumably Norris eliminated this excess of fury and revised toward the published version because he had seen that a new structure would give the book more significant form. He left behind the inferior and boyish idea that McTeague would be interesting just because he was huge and wild. McTeague's grotesque rage in the first version rose too early in the book and too high (and gave Marcus too much provocation) for the reader to remain sympathetic to McTeague. It was better to delay his violence until the later fight, in which Marcus provokes him again, unbearably. McTeague becomes thus more completely sinned against and less sinning.

McTeague's self-control has kept him harmless for many years, but surrounding him on Polk Street are the corrupt. For them gold is a mania. These others are, like McTeague, victims of forces from outside themselves. But the author treats them with less sympathy than he treats McTeague. For their avarice he punishes them—Trina, Marcus, Maria, and the suicide Zerkow—by violent death before McTeague is finally to be destroyed.

"We are, in a word, experimental moralists, showing by experiment in what way a passion acts in a certain social condition."

So Zola wrote in *Le Roman expérimental,* that handbook of Naturalism's rationalization. If it is true that Norris had in mind something of this sort, he may have owed to Zola the general intention of *McTeague.* He certainly owed to the French Naturalist much else that is in the novel. Much of its general structure is similar to that of Zola's *L'Assommoir,* in which Gervaise and Lantier are lovers with illegitimate children before Lantier leaves her and she marries Coupeau. Norris eliminated the original situation's immorality when he arranged his similar Trina-Marcus-McTeague triangle. Like the Coupeaus the McTeagues have a happy period before trouble starts. Then both men become idle. Though both formerly made a point of avoiding strong drink, Coupeau takes to brandy, McTeague to whiskey. In their decline both wives become scrub women. *McTeague* does not parallel *L'Assommoir* in the episode of Trina's murder or the events which follow, except that Marcus re-enters the story as does Lantier. The account of the passage of various types of people along Polk Street in the first chapter of *McTeague* owes much of its structure to an early scene in *L'Assommoir.* The marriage ceremonies in the two books are closely similar. So are the wedding feasts, which also have a parallel in Zola's *Nana;* though here as elsewhere Norris excluded from *McTeague* some elements of his sources which he must have thought indecent or thought his readers might consider so.

La Bête humaine was probably the novel of Zola's from which Norris drew most in his study of "the brute within"—though his unintelligent adaptation of this element, especially in the second chapter of *McTeague,* shows in its awkward moral rigor slight relation to its model. *McTeague* is also indebted to *La Bête humaine* for its subplot: the episodes of Maria and her husband are similar to those in which Zola's Misard obsessively searches the house in an effort to find his wife's hidden gold and kills her when he does not succeed.

There can be little doubt that in *McTeague* Norris drew on Zola's work for these and several other specific motifs and devices in addition to the more general Naturalistic elements of low milieu,

emphasis on heredity and environment and on degeneration, and the practice of using subordinate symbols such as the quarreling dogs and Mrs. Sieppe's mousetrap as well as a single predominant symbol. But Norris's imitation of Zola was not slavish. He was able to make the book his own, skillfully constructing the stages of McTeague's rise and fall and giving much of the action verisimilitude by remarkable observation and selection of significant detail. The novel has its great faults. Crude symbolism is overworked; the conception of the central character is often unsure; there is an excessive increase of melodrama in the final chapters. But these failings are not enough to demolish the force of the book as a whole or the tenacity with which many of its scenes and episodes remain in the mind of the reader.

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June, 1950

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