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FRANK NORRIS



"I have observed that a reader seldom peruses a book with pleasure till he knows whether the writer of it be a black or a fair man, of a mild or choleric disposition, married or a bachelor, with other particulars of the like nature that conduce very much to the right understanding of the author."

—The Spectator

D P & C O



FRANK NORRIS

Whose recently discovered novel "Vandover and the Brute," has just been published

Frank Norris

— 1870-1902

*An intimate sketch of the man who was
universally acclaimed the greatest
American writer of his generation.*

By CHARLES G. NORRIS

FRANK NORRIS was a born story-teller; he acquired the art of literary expression after hard work and a long apprenticeship. His original intention was to be an artist. When he was seventeen he went to France, and enrolled as a student at the *Atelier Julien*, in Paris. He remained there two years and became absorbed, not in art, but in chivalry. The reading of Froissart's *Chronicles* was his daily recreation. He became so imbued with the spirit of medievalism, and so familiar with the manners and customs of the time, that once with much amusement he pointed out to me an error in Scott's "Ivanhoe," in which one of its characters is described as wearing a certain kind of armor that was not in use until a hundred years later; a mistake that was as obvious to him as if someone to-day should depict Richelieu in a frock coat and top hat.

Many and diverse reasons have led men and women to literature, but none quite so strange as that which induced him to elect that vocation.

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His earliest ventures into literature were more to provide a vehicle for his illustrations than for any interest he had in writing itself. Thus it was that his first novel, "Robert d'Artois," was written, — a crude amateurish effort that bore little evidence that he was ever to become a great author.

But he loved story-telling, and his imagination knew no limitations. My earliest recollections are of the endless and involved stories of love and chivalry that he wove about my lead soldiers, to my never-failing enchantment and delight. There were several thousands of these soldiers, and each captain and lieutenant had a name and history of his own. In these stories there was an utter disregard of historical accuracy and sequence. Thus the Veiled Prophet of Khorassan, the Cid and Khedive, Machiavelli and Corbullo the Saxon all lived and had their being together in this miniature world of lead. There were eleven years between our ages, and it is impossible to suppose that my brother found any lasting amusement in entertaining one so much younger than himself. Rather, I fancy, it was his interest in his own mental processes, and in the fantastic situations he devised. He would spend hours fashioning wonderful cannon, out of the thick handles of his paint-brushes, and the sides of cigar-boxes. These were painted ivory black with red trimmings, and christened "The Spitfire," and "The Peacemaker." He drew maps of the two countries continually at war, "Sparta" and "Rome," dividing them into provinces, carefully marking the rivers and mountains, roads and railways.

Norris.



A sketch of his dog "Monk" by Frank Norris, one of the few examples of his work as an artist, that has been preserved.

At this time we were all in Paris. When the family returned to California, leaving Frank in Paris to continue his study of art, he began writing me a novel in which all our favorite characters reappeared, revolving about myself, whom he described as the nephew of the Duke of Burgundy. I wish I had space to repeat this story in detail. It was written in the second person, on closely-ruled notepaper, one sheet slipped inside another, and the whole fastened together with a small loop of red or blue string in the upper left hand corner. It came to me in chapters, rolled up inside French newspapers to save postage. Each installment was profusely illustrated with pencil sketches, mostly of myself as an esquire, a man-at-arms, an equerry, and finally as a knight. Plots and episodes from the works of Scott, Francis Bacon, Frank Stockton and others were lifted bodily, sometimes the actual wording was borrowed. I remember a sentence, "The night closed down dark as a wolf's mouth," that years later I found again in the opening of a chapter of "Quentin Durward."

Frank came home before these adventures were finished. He left the heroine lashed to a railroad track, and me locked in a neighboring switchman's tower. My story was never concluded, but it was to this time in our lives that he referred in his dedication of "The Pit:"

"In memory of certain lamentable tales of the round (dining-room) table heroes; of the epic of the pewter platoons, and the romance-cycle of '*Gaston le Fox*', which we invented, maintained, and found marvelous at a time when we both were boys."

He was nineteen when he came home and began to prepare for the entrance examinations of the University of California. While he was studying for them he elected to write a three canto poem in the metre of Scott's verse. It was the first writing of merit that he did. While still in Paris he had written a short article on the armor of the fifteenth century, and illustrated it, but it was no such serious attempt as was the poem. "Ancient Armour" appeared in the San Francisco *Chronicle*, in March 1889, and he received nine dollars,—the first money ever earned by his pen.

The three canto poem was entitled "Yvernelle," and was published by Lippincott. He sent some of his pen-and-ink sketches with it, but these were returned. The publishers felt that the book would sell best as a holiday offering, in which illustrations played an important part. I suppose that this was only a polite way of saying that his own illustrations were not good enough. Will Low and Frederick Dealman eventually did some of the pictures, and the book was bound very handsomely, and sold for three and five dollars a volume.

While he was in college Frank began to take his writing seriously. He did not have a very high respect for his instructors in the English department. I recall his irritation when an essay on "Thomas à Becket" was returned to him, with no more definite criticism than the single word "Fustian," scrawled across its title page. But he began to read fiction critically, and at this time was never without a yellow paper-covered novel of Zola in his hand. He loved Kipling, too, and Richard Harding Davis, and

thought William Dean Howells a much greater novelist than, in those days, he was generally conceded to be.

One of Frank's first stories, "Son of a Sheik," was written while he was a Sophomore, and published in the *Argonaut*. Another very remarkable story, called "Lauth," appeared in the *Overland Monthly*. During the early part of 1894, — his last six months at the University of California, — a series of stories, under the general heading of "Outward and Visible Signs," made their appearance in the *Overland*, and in August of the same year, "The Caged Lion," one of the best short stories he ever wrote, was published in the *Argonaut*. He never sold anything to the eastern magazines, however. The manuscripts he sent, unfailingly came back. He had hopes that William Doxey, who had then a flourishing publishing business in San Francisco, would bring out a volume of his short stories. I remember how earnestly he worked on some of the illustrations for this book, pressing me into service as his model, keeping me posing for hours. He was undecided between "Beer and Skittles" and "On and Off the Asphalt" as a title. But this plan never came to anything.

Some time before he completed his four years at the California University he began "McTeague;" it was well started before he came east to take a year's post-graduate work at Harvard. This was the most formative year of his life as a writer. I have heard him say many times that he learned more about writing the English language, in the nine months

course of "English 22," under Professor Lewis E. Gates, than he did during any other period of his life. He dedicated "McTeague" to Professor Gates when it was published. About this time, too, he began to study the dictionary. I have seen him poring over it for hours, making notes of words and their meanings. Every morning he always read the death notices in the newspapers, for the sake of finding unusual names. It was from this source that he got Annixter, Jadwin, and Magnus Derrick.

He wrote the greater part of "McTeague" during his year at Harvard, but before completing it, he commenced "Vandover and The Brute," the novel which has just been published. This book was destined to have a curious history. It was inspired, to a large degree, by the unmorality of the undergraduates with whose lives he was familiar. Grewsome in theme, powerfully realistic, he followed the story to its terrible and logical conclusion, then laid it aside for other work, and all but forgot its very existence. After his death it remained in storage, packed away in a San Francisco warehouse, and when, in the fire that followed the great earthquake, the storehouse was burned to the ground, "Vandover" was presumably destroyed with it. By a curious destiny, however, the crate containing the manuscript was saved, but it was only after years that it was identified, and the lost story brought to light.

As indicative of the seriousness with which Frank was now beginning to regard his work, I remember that he kept a black notebook, in his inside coat pocket, in which he set down a heterogeneous collection

of notes of his own observations: a well-turned sentence, a good name, the possible title of a book. One of these entries, I remember, read: "The hands of the village clock closed like a pair of shears, and cut the night in twain." This book was his greatest treasure. Years afterward he told me that keeping it taught him the difference between seeing life subjectively and objectively. No one, he believed, could become a writer, until he could regard life and people, and the world in general, from the objective point-of-view, — until he could remain detached, outside, maintain the unswerving attitude of the observer. I read part of his notebook once, and got soundly kicked for my impertinence, but years afterward I came upon many of these same notes in his work, amplified and adapted.

In 1895 he came back to San Francisco, and in October sailed for South Africa to write a series of articles for a syndicate of newspapers. His plan was to start at Capetown, go north to Johannesburg, trek through Matabeleland, thence onward to the Nile, and down the river to Cairo. A happy accident took him to Africa at this time. No sooner had he set foot on Boer soil than trouble with the English began to brew. By the time he reached Johannesburg, the famous Jameson's raid had been projected. Delighted at the possibility of war, Frank enlisted in the English army for the defense of Johannesburg, and had the supreme satisfaction of being assigned regular accoutrements, a rifle, a number of rounds of ammunition, and above all a horse! Reading his journal of those days one catches

his tremendous excitement when news from Jameson and his six hundred men was hourly awaited. He describes with what gratification he received an invitation to Christmas dinner from John Hays Hammond. But this festive meal nearly caused him a long imprisonment, for with the collapse of the raid, Hammond and many others identified with the uprising were thrown into jail, their lives at the mercy of the Boer government. My brother was given thirty days to get out of the country.

He was unable to obey this order however. Almost immediately he came down with African fever, and was very close to death. A scarcity of provisions in Johannesburg sent bread up to seven dollars a loaf, and in a short time his letter of credit was exhausted. At this point there are many empty pages in his journal. He confessed to me afterward that he was too weak from fever to remove the cap of his fountain pen. Finally there occurs this entry:

*"I'm out to sea, I'm out to sea!
'Tisn't half as fine as I thought it would be!"*

He returned to San Francisco in the spring of 1896 to spend months in an effort to regain his shattered health. Of the fever he never entirely rid himself; it recurred at intervals during the remaining six years of his life, and when he was stricken with appendicitis, it supplied the complication that resulted in his death.

For the following two years his literary work was almost entirely associated with the *Wave*, of which John O'Hara Cosgrave was then the editor. Every

week Frank wrote either an article, a sketch or a short story for this periodical. In looking over his output at this time one cannot but marvel at the amount of material he turned out, and the activity of his creative faculty.

In the summer of 1897, Frank went up to the "Big Dipper Mine," in Placer County, California, to complete "McTeague." It was there that the closing chapters of the book were written. The death of Trina in the kindergarten had been written some three years earlier. The scene of the chapter immediately following this incident in the book is laid in the very spot where the novel was being completed: the Big Dipper Mine, on Iowa Hill, near Colfax.

The author describes McTeague as entering the office of the mine, to ask the superintendent for employment.

"The dentist approached the counter and leaned his elbows upon it. Three men were in the room, — a tall, lean young man, with a thick head of hair surprisingly gray, who was playing with a half-grown Great Dane puppy. . . ."

This was Frank himself. One of the other men was his college chum, the owner of the mine, who was afterward to furnish the material for the character of Annixter, in "The Octopus."

Nothing could be more characteristic of the whimsical humor of Frank Norris than this casual introduction of himself into his story. He was describing the room in which he was writing, with utter faithfulness. He came in due time to himself and included his own person in the picture.

The manuscripts of his two novels, "McTeague"



FRANK NORRIS

Taken at Roselle, New Jersey, in 1900, about the time he was writing "The Octopus".



Luna's Mexican restaurant which figured so largely in "Blix" and other stories of Frank Norris.



Frank Norris's home in San Francisco up to the time he went to Harvard. This is the house so carefully described in "Vandover and the Brute" where Vandover and the "Governor" lived.

and "Vandover and the Brute," began their eastern visits, and their author commenced to write "Moran of the Lady Letty," the first chapters of which appeared in the *Wave* before more than a part of the book was written. In "Blix" he draws an amusing caricature of himself at this period of his life and the "Captain Jack" of that book, was the Captain Joseph Hodgson to whom "Moran" was dedicated. Hodgson was in charge of the United States Life Saving Station near the Presidio, in San Francisco, and Frank used to read the early chapters of "Moran" to him, getting him to criticize his nautical phraseology, and help him with the actual seamanship.

When the story was half-completed, Frank started East to write up the Mardi Gras festivities in New Orleans, but he got no farther than St. Louis when the summons to New York, — for which he had long been waiting in one form or another — arrived.

This was a letter from John S. Phillips, a member of the firm of the Doubleday, McClure Company, who had read as much of "Moran" as had appeared up to that time. Recognition had been won, it remained only to fulfill expectations. "Moran" was published in September of the same year, "McTeague" the following spring, and "Blix" six months later. "Vandover," strongest of them all, was not in accord with the spirit of the day in literature, and in this time of rapid production, it was easy to ignore its claim.

The remaining four years of his life were packed with varied events. In that time he published six novels; he went as a war correspondent through the Santiago campaign, and again all but died with a

return of the treacherous fever; he married; and a little daughter was born to him.

Four months before his death, he returned to San Francisco, still in the very prime of his youth, successful and yet fired with splendid new ambitions for his work. It is of these last days that I wish finally to speak. We were constantly together at this time and developed an intimacy we had never before reached. It was then that he told me of the last novel of the trilogy of "The Wheat," to which "The Octopus" and "The Pit" belonged. Not one word of this book was ever written. It was not to be called "The Wolf," however, as was announced. Its pivotal episode was to deal with a famine-stricken country of Europe, and the timely appearance, from across the sea, of three huge American schooners, — wheat-ships, — loaded to their capacity with the great crop that, in spite of the quarrels of farmers and railroads, and in spite of the manipulation of the bulls and bears on the stock market, was to fulfill its destiny as "the nourisher of nations."

But the great book he was burning to write was to centre about the battle of Gettysburg, the biggest and most vital event in American history, and this book would undoubtedly have been the great American novel if his handling of it had been as big as its theme. Just as the wheat stood to him as a great world-force, so the battle of Gettysburg represented the very spirit of America. It was to have been a tremendous novel in three parts, a great trilogy, each part dealing with one of the days of the battle, a work that would have taken him years to write.

I cannot close this sketch of Frank Norris without a word concerning his unfailing sense of humor, his modesty and simplicity. During those last months of his life, human and natural forces combined to heap their favors upon him. He was hailed as America's greatest author; Howells and Mark Twain wrote him, in encouragement and praise; publishers clamored for his work; and reporters, in whose ranks he had so lately been pursued him, and begged for interviews.

There is no better proof of his greatness than that this adulation left him still humble, pleasantly surprised, and grateful. He was thoroughly human about it. He enjoyed it and delighted in it. He was not quite sure that it was not a mistake, but while it lasted he found it gratifying. But his attitude toward his popularity had nothing in common with his attitude toward his work. If the public and the critics liked "The Pit," that was very well; but they should have no consideration when he wrote his next book, or the one following that or any he should ever write.

An event that occurred at this time is most eloquent of his contempt for the publicity so eagerly sought by authors generally. An old friend, a Dr. Lawlor, who had been appointed by the Governor of California as superintendent of one of the state's asylums for the feeble-minded, was attacked by the local press of San Francisco for political reasons. It seemed a case of unwarrantable persecution and my brother was indignant. At a meeting of some of the petty politicians, Lawlor gave the lie direct to one of

his accusers. The man whipped out his revolver, and Frank, who was standing near, was able to grab the weapon in time and wrench it away before harm was done. The same afternoon the San Francisco *Examiner* called him on the telephone. The New York *Journal* had wired for a full-page story of the "shooting-scrape" in which Frank Norris had saved his friend's life. I shall never forget his answer to the representative of the *Examiner* on the other end of the telephone.

"You tell the New York *Journal* kindly to go to hell," said he, and hung up the receiver.

Of the untimely and tragic ending of so brilliant a life, there is nothing that I can add to what has already been written. He had returned to San Francisco with the intention of doing what Jack London finally attempted a long time afterward — sailing across the Pacific in a chartered schooner manned by his own crew. The voyage he ultimately made took him to other shores, but I like to think it was with him as he wrote of it in his own sonnet "Crepusculum," many years before:

*I bear them say our little life's "a day," —
That, born with light, at dusk it dies away.
I bear them say that Death is that life's night.
That we but wax and wane, with changing light.
O Blind! The day's not yet, this life of ours
Is still the night's slow retinue of hours;
Its sorrows, nightmares, phantasms of the shade,
Its pleasures, dreams that only form to fade.
Our life's a night through which we blindly grope,
With outstretched palms, hoping 'gainst failing hope.
Death ushers in the dawn of life's true day,
Though gray the eve, so is the morning gray:—
Be thou uplift, O heart! Death's visage wan
Is lighted not with twilight, but with dawn.*



The "Dental Parlors" over the Post Office on Polk Street, San Francisco, where McTeague lived. A dentist's sign may be seen under the first side window of the second floor.



The coffee shop on Polk Street, San Francisco, where McTeague ate his meals. This and all the other buildings in these photographs were destroyed in the earthquake and fire.

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