

she ever married him at all, she rolled her gloves up into a wad muttering, "He was so handsome to look at—so handsome!" When I remarked that handsome articles usually came high, she flashed out, "Yes, and I'd do it agin, too, I reckon." When I asked her what kind of a woman Lizzie Whappen, the mother of Realf's children, was, her little beady eyes glittered at me a moment and she retorted, "O, she wasn't so much to look at!" It was almost pathetic, that little feminine burst from this old termagant, fairly shrivelled up by her sleepless hate. I believe she really loves the fellow yet and can't help herself, and hates him and herself and the world and especially "them other women" accordingly. Decidedly Catharine Cassidy is more than a scold and a vixen, just as Realf was more than a sot and a bigamist. Life is not to be measured in a phrase. It would take no less a person than M. Honore de Balzac himself to do justice to those two strange people.

A new and a great book has been written. The name of it is "McTeague, a Story of San Francisco," and the man who wrote it is Mr. Frank Norris. The great presses of the country go on year after year grinding out commonplace books, just as each generation goes on busily reproducing its own mediocrity. When in this enormous output of ink and paper, these thousands of volumes that are yearly rushed upon the shelves of the book stores, one appears which contains both power and promise, the reader may be pardoned some enthusiasm. Excellence always surprises: we are never quite prepared for it. In the case of "McTeague, a Story of San Francisco," it is even more surprising than usual. In the first place the title is not alluring, and not until you have read the books, can you know that there is an admirable consistency in the stiff, uncompromising commonplaceness of that title. In the second place the name of the author is as yet comparatively unfamiliar, and finally the book is dedicated to a member of the Harvard faculty, suggesting that whether it be a story of San Francisco or Dawson City, it must necessarily be vaporous, introspective and chiefly concerned with "literary" impressions. Mr. Norris is, indeed, a "Harvard man," but that he is a good many other kinds of a man is self-evident. His look is, in the language of Mr. Norman Hapgood, the work of "a large human being, with a firm stomach, who knows and loves the people."

In a novel of such high merit as this, the subject matter is the least important consideration. Every newspaper contains the essential material for another "Comedie Humaine." In this case "McTeague," the central figure, happens to be a dentist practicing in a little side street of San Francisco. The novel opens with this description of him: "It was Sunday, and, according to his custom on that day, McTeague took his dinner at two in the afternoon at the car conductor's 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. 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 with coke, he lay back in his operating chair at the bay window, reading the paper, drinking steam beer, and smoking his huge porcelain pipe while his food digested; crop-full, stupid and warm." McTeague had grown up in a mining camp in the mountains.

He remembered the years he had spent there trundling heavy cars of ore in and out of the tunnel under the direction of his father. For thirteen days out 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, crazed with alcohol. His mother cooked for the miners. Her one ambition was that her son should enter a profession. He was apprenticed to a traveling quack dentist and after a fashion, learned the business.

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 blonde 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 as hard as wooden mallets, strong as vice, the hands of the o'clock-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.

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 some day, but as yet it was far beyond his means.

Then Mr. Norris launches into a description of the street in which "McTeague lives. He presents that street as it is on Sunday, as it is on working days; as it is in the early dawn when the workmen are going out with pickaxes on their shoulders, as it is at ten o'clock when the women are out purchasing from the small shopkeepers, as it is at night when the shop girls are out with the soda-fountain tenders and the motor cars dash by full of theatre-goers, and the Salvationists sing before the saloon on the corner. In four pages he reproduces the life in a by-street of a great city, the little tragedy of the small shopkeeper. There are many ways of handling environment—most of them bad. When a young author has very little to say and no story worth telling, he resorts to environment. It is frequently used to disguise a weakness of structure, as ladies who paint landscapes put their cows knee-deep in water to conceal the defective drawing of the legs. But such description as one meets throughout Mr. Norris' book is in itself convincing proof of power, imagination and literary skill. It is a positive and active force, stimulating the reader's imagination, giving him an actual command, a realizing sense of this world into which he is suddenly transplanted. It gives to the book perspective, atmosphere, effects of time and distance, creates the illusion of life. This power of mature, and accurate and comprehensive description is very unusual among the younger American writers. Most of them observe the world through a temperament, and are more occupied with their medium than the objects they see. And temperament is a glass which distorts most astonishingly. But this young man sees with a clear eye, and reproduces with a touch firm and decisive, strong almost to brutalness. Yet this hand that can depict so powerfully the brute strength and brute passions of a "McTeague," can deal very finely and adroitly with the feminine element of his story. This is his portrait of the little Swiss girl, "Trina," whom the dentist marries:

"Trina was very small and prettily made. Her face was round and rather pale; her eyes long and narrow and blue, like the half-opened eyes of a baby; her lips and the lobes of her tiny ears were

pale, a little suggestive of anaemia. But it was to her hair that one's attention was most attracted. Heaps and heaps of blue-black coils and braids, a royal crown of swarthy bands, a veritable sable tiara, heavy, abundant and odorous. All the vitality that should have given color to her face seemed to have been absorbed by that marvelous hair: It was the coiffure of a queen that shadowed the temples of this little bourgeoisie."

The tragedy of the story dates from a chance, a seeming stroke of good fortune, one of those terrible gifts of the Danaï. A few weeks before her marriage "Trina" drew \$5,000 from a lottery ticket. From that moment her passion for hoarding money becomes the dominant theme of the story, takes command of the book and its characters. After their marriage the dentist is disbarred from practice. They move into a garret where she starves her husband and herself to save that precious hoard. She sells even his office furniture, everything but his concertina and his canary bird, with which he stubbornly refuses to part and which are destined to become very important accessories in the property room of the theatre where this drama is played. This removal from their first home is to this story what Gervaise's removal from her shop is to L'Aesommoir; it is the fatal episode of the third act, the sacrifice of self-respect, the beginning of the end. From that time the money stands between "Trina" and her husband. Outraged and humiliated, hating her for her meanness, demoralized by his idleness and despair, he begins to abuse her. The story becomes a careful and painful study of the disintegration of this union, a penetrating and searching analysis of the degeneration of these two souls, the woman's corroded by greed, the man's poisoned by disappointment and hate.

And all the while this same painful theme is placed in a lower key. Maria, the housemaid who took care of "McTeague's" dental parlors in his better days, was a half-crazy girl from somewhere in Central America, she herself did not remember just where. But she had a wonderful story about her people owning a dinner service of pure gold with a punch bowl you could scarcely lift, which rang like a church bell when you struck it. On the strength of this story "Zerow," the Jew junk man, marries her, and believing that she knows where this treasure is hidden, bullies and tortures her to force her to disclose her secret. At last "Maria" is found with her throat cut, and "Zerow" is picked up by the wharf with a sack full of rusty tin cans, which in his dementia he must have thought the fabled dinner service of gold.

From this it is a short step to McTeague's crime. He kills his wife to get possession of her money, and escapes to the mountains. While he is on his way south, pushing toward Mexico, he is overtaken by his murdered wife's cousin and former suitor. Both men are half mad with thirst, and there in the desert wastes of Death's Valley, they spring to their last conflict. The cousin falls, but before he dies he slips a handcuff over "McTeague's" arm, and so the author leaves his hero in the wastes of Death's Valley, a hundred miles from water, with a dead man chained to his arm. As he stands there the canary bird, the survivor of his happier days, to which he had clung with stubborn affection, begins "chattering feebly in its little gilt prison." It reminds one a little of Stevenson's use of poor "Goddedaal's" canary in "The Wrecker." It is just such sharp, sure strokes that bring out the high lights in a story and separate excellence from the commonplace. They are at once dramatic and revelatory. Lacking them, a novel which may otherwise be a good one, lacks its chief reason for being. The fault with many worthy

attempts at fiction lies not in what they are, but in what they are not.

Mr. Norris' model, if he will admit that he has followed one, is clearly no less a person than M. Zola himself. Yet there is no discoverable trace of imitation in his book. He has simply taken a method which has been most successfully applied in the study of French life and applied it in studying American life, as one uses certain algebraic formulae to solve certain problems. It is perhaps the only truthful literary method of dealing with that part of society which environment and heredity hedge about like the walls of a prison. It is true that Mr. Norris now and then allows his "method" to become too prominent, that his restraint savors of constraint, yet he has written a true story of the people, courageous, dramatic, full of matter and warm with life. He has addressed himself seriously to art, and he seems to have no ambition to be clever. His horizon is wide, his invention vigorous and bold, his touch heavy and warm and human. This man is not limited by literary prejudices: he sees the people as they are, he is close to them and not afraid of their unloveliness. He has looked at truth in the depths, among men begrimed by toil and besotted by ignorance, and still found her fair. "McTeague" is an achievement for a young man. It may not win at once the success which it deserves, but Mr. Norris is one of those who can afford to wait.



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