

THE PASSING SHOW

WILLA SIBERT CATHER

An Hair Apparent.

Last winter a young Californian, Mr. Frank Norris, published a novel with the unpretentious title, "McTeague: a Story of San Francisco." It was a book that could not be ignored nor dismissed with a word. There was something very unusual about it, about its solidity and mass, the thoroughness and firmness of texture, and it came down like a blow from a sledge hammer among the slighter and more sprightly performances of the hour.

The most remarkable thing about the book was its maturity and compactness. It has none of the ear-marks of those entertaining "young writers" whom every season produces as inevitably as its debutantes, young men who surprise for an hour and then settle down to producing industriously for the class with which their peculiar trick of phrase has found favor. It was a book addressed to the American people and to the critics of the world, the work of a young man who had set himself to the art of authorship with an almighty seriousness, and who had no ambition to be clever. "McTeague" was not an experiment in style nor a pretty piece of romantic folly, it was a true story of the people—having about it, as M. Zola would say, "the smell of the people"—courageous, dramatic, full of matter and warm with life. It was realism of the most uncompromising kind. The theme was such that the author could not have expected sudden popularity for his book, such as sometimes overtakes monstrosities of style in these discouraging days when Knighthood is in Flower to the extent of a quarter of a million copies, nor could he have hoped for pressing commissions from the fire side periodicals. The life story of a quack dentist who sometimes extracted molars with his fingers, who mistreated and finally murdered his wife, is not, in itself, attractive. But, after all, the theme counts for very little. Every newspaper contains the essential subject matter for another *Comedie Humaine*. The important point is that a man considerably under thirty could take up a subject so grim and unattractive, and that, for the mere love of doing things well, he was able to hold himself down to the task of developing it completely, that he was able to justify this quack's existence in literature, to thrust this hairy, blonde dentist with the "salient jaw of the carnivora," in amongst the immortals.

It was after M. Zola had completed one of the greatest and gloomiest of his novels of Parisian life, that he went down by the sea and wrote "La Reve," that tender, adolescent story of love and purity and youth. So, almost simultaneously with "McTeague," Mr. Norris published "Blix," another San Francisco story, as short as "McTeague" was lengthy, as light as "McTeague" was heavy, as poetic and graceful as "McTeague" was somber and charmless. Here is a man worth waiting on; a man who is both realist and poet, a man who can teach

"Not only by a comet's rush,
But by a rose's birth."

Yet unlike as they are, in both books the source of power is the same, and, for that matter, it was even the same in his first book, "Moran of the Lady Letty" Mr. Norris has dispensed with the conventional symbols that have crept into art, with the trite, half-truths and circumlocutions, and got back to the physical basis of things. He has abjured tea-table psychology, and the analysis of figures in the carpet and sub-

tile dissections of intellectual impotencies, and the diverting game of words and the whole literature of the nerves. He is big and warm and sometimes brutal, and the strength of the soil comes up to him with very little loss in the transmission. His art strikes deep down into the roots of life and the foundation of Things as They Are—not as we tell each other they are at the tea-table. But he is realistic art, not artistic realism. He is courageous, but he is without bravado.

He sees things freshly, as though they had not been seen before, and describes them with singular directness and vividness, not with morbid acuteness, with a large, wholesome joy of life. Nowhere is this more evident than in his insistent use of environment. I recall the passage in which he describes the street in which McTeague lives. He represents 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 marketing among 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 theatergoers, and the Salvationists sing before the saloon on the corner. In four pages he reproduces in detail 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 transported. It gives to the book perspective, atmosphere, effects of time and distance, creates the illusion of life. This power of mature 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 watch. 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 brutality.

Mr. Norris approaches things on their physical side; his characters are personalities of flesh before they are anything else, types before they are individuals. Especially is this true of his women. His Trina is "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 seems to have been absorbed by that marvelous hair. It was the coiffure of a queen that shadowed the temples of this little bourgeoisie." Blix had "round, full arms," and "the skin of her face was white and clean, except where it flushed into a most charming pink upon her smooth, cool cheeks." In this grasp of the element of things, this keen, clean, frank pleasure at color and odor and warmth, this candid admission of the negative of beauty, which is co-existent with and inseparable from it, lie much

of his power and promise. Here is a man catholic enough to include the extremes of physical and moral life, strong enough to handle the crudest colors and darkest shadows. Here is a man who has an appetite for the physical universe, who loves the rank smells of crowded alley-ways, or the odors of boudoirs, or the delicate perfume exhaled from a woman's skin; who is not afraid of Pan, be he ever so shaggy, and redolent of the herd.

Structurally, where most young novelists are weak, Mr. Norris is very strong. He has studied the best French masters, and he has adopted their methods quite simply, as one selects an algebraic formula to solve his particular problem. As to his style, that is, as expression always is, just as vigorous as his thought compels it to be, just as vivid as his conception warrants. If God Almighty has given a man ideas, he will get himself a style from one source or another. Mr. Norris, fortunately, is not a conscious stylist. He has too much to say to be equisitely vain about his medium. He has the kind of brain stuff that would vanquish difficulties in any profession, that might be put to building battleships, or solving problems of finance, or to devising colonial policies. Let us be thankful that he has put it to literature. Let us be thankful, moreover, that he is not introspective and that his intellect does not devour itself, but feeds upon the great race of man, and, above all, let us rejoice that he is not a "temperamental" artist, but something larger, for a great brain and an assertive temperament seldom dwell together.

There are clever men enough in the field of American letters, and the fault of most of them is merely one of magnitude; they are not large enough; they travel in small orbits, they play on muted strings. They sing neither of the combats of Atrides nor the labors of Cadmus, but of the tea-table and the Odyssey of the Rialto. Flaubert said that a drop of water contained all the elements of the sea, save one—immensity. Mr. Norris is concerned only with serious things, he has only large ambitions. His brush is bold, his color is taken fresh from the kindly earth, his canvas is large enough to hold American life, the real life of the people. He has come into the court of the troubadours singing the song of Elys, the song of warm, full nature. He has struck the true note of the common life. He is what Mr. Norman Hapgood said the great American dramatist must be: "A large human being, with a firm stomach, who knows and loves the people."

A CLOSE CALL.

"I congratulate you, old man, more than I can say. It was a dreadfully narrow escape."

"You bet it was," assented the bandaged and splinted one, earnestly. "Why if that car had hit me only the least fraction of a second later, it'd been everlastingly too late. As it was, that idiot Boorby had got as far as 'Why are the next forty days like an um—' You bet, it was a close call."—The Bazar.

A FULL COLLECTION.

"Jes one word," said Uncle Remus from the pulpit, as the collection was about to be taken; "dars been a mighty sight ob chicken-stealin' 'bout here lately. Now don' any yo niggers dat help steal dem chickens put nuffin' in de 'lection-box. I's not goin' hab any yo 'gracin' de good Lawd dat way, no-how!"—The Bazar.

Father (proudly)—My daughter would be a credit to any man.

The Duke—That's the kind of a wife I want.—Town Topics.

IN THE NIGHT.

In the night, in the night,
when thou liest alone,
And the moonlight is
white on thy breast,
'Tis my love that has come
over land, over sea,
To be near and watch over they rest—
In the night.

In the night, in the night,
when thou liest alone,
And the rain pours blind tears
down thy pane,
'Tis my soul that has come
through the storm, through the night,
And that weeps
at thy window in vain.

In the night, in the night,
when the bitter winds grieve
Round thy casements
the long hours through,
'Tis my voice that has come
through the miles, through the years,
And is pleading
and calling to you.

In the night, in the night,
when thy pulses are warm,
And thine arms
vainly reach after mine,
'Tis my dream that has climbed
where my lips may not go,
And is telling
their longing to thine.

In the night, the long night,
when thou liest alone,
And the snow shall lie white
on thy breast,
Ah! then I shall come,
over land, over sea,
To be near and watch over thy rest—
In the night.

—Willa Sibert Cather, in The Library.

SONG.

We are so jolly, contented and gay,
Enid and I and the baby,
What do we care for the Appian Way,
Enid and I and the baby?
Politics, wars and the tariff may go,
Little we reck how the fickle winds blow,
We're a triumvirate, mighty and low,
Enid and I and the baby.

Climb up, my little son, here to my knee—
Enid and I and the baby,
Isn't he sturdy and brave as can be?—
Enid and I and the baby;
Take him, my dear, he is weary with play,
See how he blinks in that Sleepy-town way,
Here is a kiss all around, and hurrah—
Enid and I and the baby.
—Robert Noveman in the April Lippen-

"That swindler was a clever fellow."
"Nonsense. His brightness was only skin deep."

J. F. HARRIS,

No. 1, Board of Trade,
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