

# McTEAGUE

A STORY OF SAN FRANCISCO

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

INSTANTLY, and for life, from the first moment of our meeting in the pages of Frank Norris's strangely appealing and brilliantly illuminating tragedy, *McTeague* and Trina, Marcus Schouler and Herr Sieppe, Miss Baker and Mr. Grannis, Zerkow, the junk man, and Maria, the half-mad housemaid, became fixtures in my mind. And that was all of twenty-seven years ago. Nor have I forgotten Polk Street or Sutter Street in San Francisco; or the Cliff House and its Seal Rocks, near where *McTeague* sat and dreamed; or the Presidio, where he fished; or the Schuetzen Park, where he and the Sieppes picnicked. Nor have I forgotten even the minor details of Death Valley and the final death grapple between Schouler and *McTeague*. Not *Wuthering Heights*, nor Becky and Rawden Crawley in *Vanity Fair*, nor Raskalnikoff in *Crime and Punishment*, nor Père Goriot and his indifferent daughter in the distinguished novel of that name, remain more definitely in my mind.

In the days of its first circulation, there was considerable complaint as to *McTeague's* vulgarity, the ignorance and brutality of its principals and their associates. For that was the day of transcendental perfection (on paper) throughout America! But since then, what a change! Now, one reads it—or some, at least, I hope—in the spirit in which it was written. Yet, several years since, when it was filmed as *Greed*, once more the same complaints from the devotees of transcendentalism. Once more it was coarse and terrible. There was no

self-sacrificing and impossible hero, no Hollywood film queen drooping sadly, yet fashionably, because of her woes.

Interestingly enough, in the now nearly three decades since this book was first issued, the critics of Europe, as well as of America, have noisily lauded Stephen Crane, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Joseph Hergesheimer, Sinclair Lewis, and others, while ignorantly or mistakenly evading Norris. And so late as this sacred May of 1927 I find the usually well-informed H. G. Wells speaking of Stephen Crane as not only the pioneer but the most brilliant of all of the early realists of this generation. Stuff and nonsense! Crane was not the pioneer nor even the equal in any sense of the man who led the van of realism in America. That honour—if any American will admit it to be such—goes to Henry B. Fuller, of Chicago, who as early as 1886 published *With the Procession*, as sound and agreeable a piece of American realism as that decade, or any since, produced. And in 1891 he wrote another—*The Cliff Dwellers*—which preceded by three years Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, the so-labelled pioneer work in this field, as did *Main Travelled Roads*, by Hamlin Garland, a sound realistic study of rural life which was published in the same year. But I, for one, am not among those who point to *The Red Badge of Courage* as of value in the realistic sense in so far as the American scene is concerned. A vivid picture of war as such, certainly, but war anywhere, not especially here. And a vital presentation of the psychology of war, but not more so for America than elsewhere. And following Fuller and Garland and not preceding them.

Similarly, in the case of Norris (as I understand now from his brother Charles G. Norris), *McTeague* was conceived in 1891, in the twenty-first year of the life of

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the author, and executed between his twenty-second and twenty-sixth, while *The Red Badge of Courage* was offered to D. Appleton & Company, of New York, in 1894, and actually published in 1895. (From Ripley Hitchcock, who was connected with Appleton's at one time, I gathered that there was considerable revision of this work by the author just before publication.) Therefore, if the question of pioneering had not already been disposed of by the works of Fuller and Garland, it would be necessary to cite Norris and Crane as joint pioneers, with Norris as the far more distinguished luminary of the two. For where *The Red Badge of Courage* concerns the psychology of war in general, this work of Norris's concerns San Francisco and the everyday life of a certain element of that city. In short, it is indigenous to America, and California, and San Francisco—a brilliant and accurate picture of a certain phase of life in this most amazing of new lands.

To me, when I first read it, it brought, and for the first time in America (seeing that I was conscious of realism only as related to France, England, Russia, Germany), the thrill of realism as related to America. And what a thrill! At that time I was but twenty-nine, and had just concluded *Sister Carrie*. A sister-in-law had read *McTeague* and was persistently talking of it. My wife then read it, and talked still more, characterizing the story as fascinating but grim, and praising the style. I set to it at last and read it, and was startled by the invaluable local colour, the force and reality of it all. Here was a true book, as arresting and illuminating as any I had ever read, and about America! At once I was curious as to the author, for I had just completed my own work about Chicago and New York. Who was this man? From whence did he hail? I inquired, and

from literary friends I learned that it was a first book by a young man out in San Francisco.

I will not here repeat my relations to Norris or his several kindnesses to me. Of my personal gratitude to him I have, this long while, testified. But I desire to add that his personality, once we met (and before his kindnesses had been exercised in my behalf), fixed him in my mind as a sure and vivid force, a generous and distinguished rival well worthy of one's steel.

But to return to *McTeague*, which is, indubitably, the best of the books achieved by him in the few years it was given him to live and write. (He was dead at thirty-two.) One may not care for realism, and for that reason be insensitive to so distinguished an achievement. As for myself, I acknowledge a peculiar sensitiveness to the variations and pitiable inevitabilities of such lives and incidents as are set forth in this book. Indeed, here is a book that, except for a few emotional, though none-the-less colourful and interesting, descents into either brute reality or too refined romanticism (as, for instance, the falling in love of Maria Macapa and old Zerkow or the courtship of Miss Baker and Mr. Granis), is as sombre and yet true a presentation of reality as has been conceived by any writer in any land. Think if you will, of *McTeague*, the hoggish, unlicensed tooth puller, as at times a little too dull or thick-witted either to attract or be attracted by a girl like Trina, or Marcus Schouler as a little too vigorous or vague, as occasion offers, in his interpretation of his own privileges or those of others (as, for instance, in thinking of Trina's windfall as really half his), or Mr. and Mrs. Sieppe and Owgoost as perhaps a little too broadly caricatured. None the less, the faults or blemishes here cited are of small weight as against the sterling excellence of the book as a whole.

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Indeed, one hesitates to comment on them. In the main, here is sound and honest writing, all too real because of the force and skill of the author, and including stark and colourful material out of such depths as few of our American writers, even to this hour, venture to examine, let alone seize upon, assuming they have either the wit or the skill to organize it novel wise. Yet, personally, I am convinced that it is from such relatively rough and unpolished social states that the more vivid, if less reasoned, pictures of life are to be extracted. Norris was by no means a Dostoievsky, seeking sensitively and emotionally to trace to their mystic sources the grim and devilish as well as saintly or self-abnegating impulses of men, but, most truly, he was a keen, and more inspired, observer, and a painter of the greatest skill—sensitive, vigorous, daring, and with a palette as colourful as life itself.

But why continue? After all, here is the book! And for me as fine a realization of what the American scene is like as I require. And as true of this day as that of the year or years in which it was written. Indeed, I know of no book, before or since, out of America, France, Germany, Russia, Scandinavia, or England, that is essentially more correct as to milieu and situations, or artistically and socially more illuminating and valuable.

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