

FRANK NORRIS

by C. Hartley Grattan

THE work of Frank Norris offers to the critic more problems in discrimination than any comparable body of fiction in American literature. He was not only a self-conscious rebel (for if he had been that alone the problem would be simplified). Unfortunately, he was also a rebel whose mind was extraordinarily impressionable, one who lived in an age in which the impressions offered were strong and contradictory. In his work realism and romance, art and journalism, art and business, rebellion and tradition, all come into conflict. While a considerable part of his work may be ignored, a residue remains which is of unquestionable importance. Three of his novels are undoubtedly of the first rank: *McTeague*, *Vandover and the Brute* and *The Octopus*. Various lesser stories supplement these masterly works. One must subject his theories to severe criticism. As a pioneer in realism who went far beyond the limits marked out by William Dean Howells, he had to justify himself but, since he was not the sort of person to whom it is natural to deal with ideas, he boggled the matter badly.

Norris lived through one of the most dynamic periods in American history (1870-1902). Whatever we may think of those days, he considered that the "three great and highly developed phases of Nineteenth Century Intelligence" were "science, manufactures and journalism". In the term, journalism, Norris included literature. To him fiction-writing was a branch of reporting. In this may

be found the genesis of his peculiarly perverse attitudes and the origin of many of his weaknesses. Norris did not have the analytical intelligence of an iconoclast. His rebelliousness was emotional and disorderly. He did not possess the faculty of concentrating his intelligence with piercing, destructive consistency upon his enmities. Instead, he shouted his blasphemies and trusted to the emotional force of his assertions to win him adherents. The journalization of fiction was taken by him to mean making it acceptable to the people and responsive to their demands.

"No art," Norris wrote, "that is not in the end understood by the People can live or ever did live a single generation. In the larger view, in the last analysis, the People pronounce the final judgment . . . they are after all the real seekers after truth. [Norris was fond of capitals and probably considered that they added strength to his argument.] It is not now," he went on, "a question of esthetic interest—that is, the artist's, the amateur's, the cognoscente's. It is a question of vital interest. A novel then should have chiefly a story interest, and should either tell, show, or prove something. Above all it should be remembered that 'the artist is a teacher and not a trickster.'"

As the novelist is more powerful than the newspaper or the pulpit in influencing the ideas of people, a novel should always contribute to raising the tone of social life. Style was to him of no importance: "Tell your yarn and let your style go to the devil". In-

stead of style one should aim to have a first-hand knowledge of the contemporary scene, either through close reading of the newspapers or through direct observation. Norris, in brief, seemed bent on removing intellectual and esthetic values from fiction and replacing them with values derived from rapid, accurate, first-hand accounts of observed phenomena. The novelist was to be no more than a brilliant journalist. (If Norris and Howells could have added each to the other their respective strengths, ardor for reality and meticulous style, how much more important each would have been.)

The ideas that Norris put forth about the desirable literary personality are equally without penetration. In the first place he was sure that if a novelist "is to voice the spirit of the times aright, if he is to interpret his fellows justly, he must be a Man of the People, a Good Citizen". For "one does not claim that the artist is above the business man". Furthermore:

The better the personal-morality of the writer, the better his writings. Consider Stevenson, or our own "Dean", or Hugo or Scott, men of the simplest lives, uncompromising in rectitude, scrupulously, punctiliously, quixotically honest; their morality—surely in the cases of Stevenson and Hugo—setting a new standard of religion, at least a new code of ethics.

This, certainly, is not the writing of a man with a clear comprehension of the esthetic personality. Quite apart from theory, Norris seems actually to have identified himself with the business man, for in his novels the artist is an ineffectual weakling. That is the contrast between Corthell and Jadwin in *The Pit*. The men wholly to be admired he declared to be men "made in the mould of the Leonard Woods and the Theodore Roosevelt". Such an opinion was surely that of the average "man of the people" of Norris's day. Holding these astonishing opinions, so hostile to the development of a literary personality, it is a wonder Norris managed to write three novels of major significance.

Norris was not the only important writer subjected to the influences dominant between the years 1870 and 1900. Mark Twain lived through those years also and, while he never so directly stated his conclusions, some of his activities and admirations point to a similar formulation. Henry James, on the other hand, contemned the whole situation as a plague to the spirit and worked out a special solution not widely applicable. Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane clashed with the environment also but not to their detriment. Certainly James, Bierce and Crane were not so confused in their ideas as Norris. Twain probably was. No one at any period in American literature asserted more decidedly the necessity of literary ideals than Henry James. No one had a keener sense of the necessity of style and form. Living in the same period, why did Norris accept Zola and ignore Flaubert entirely? Because Zola "got up" his subjects and flung "everything pell-mell into one overflowing *pot-au-feu*", and Flaubert proposed to write a novel which should be sustained by its style? There is no reason except Norris's utter contempt for esthetic merits. Stephen Crane and Bierce wrote journalism, of course, but they did not consider their serious work journalism. Nor did they admit the necessity of being as much like business men as possible. Norris's confusion was quite personal and in no sense the general literary attitude of his time. Few of his meritorious contemporaries arrived at his conclusions. None of his substantial successors has endorsed them.

II

His successors did, however, profit largely by his practice. There Norris stands as an unquestioned pioneer. Yet his practice was singularly uneven and the books published between 1898 and 1914 are of very unequal merit. Not all of this can be accounted for on the grounds of early and later work. Successive novels widely diverge and confusion is discoverable in single works. The novel

which was in the process of publication when he died in 1902 was markedly inferior to *Vandover and the Brute* which he had apparently forgotten and which was posthumously published in 1914. *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1898), *Blix* (1899) and *A Man's Woman* (1900) cannot be classed with his three masterpieces. Nor can *The Pit* (1903) be classed with them either. Some light can be gained by reference to his distinction between realism and romance.

According to Norris, romance "takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life", while realism is "the kind of fiction that confines itself to the type of normal life". Realism "is minute; it is the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call". Romance has "the wide world for a range, and the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black unsearched penetralia of the soul of man". Following out his distinction Norris believed himself to be a romanticist. His detailed study of sordid lower-class life in San Francisco is romance because the life is exceptional. So is his story of shipwreck and pirates. His story of wheat raising and railroad chicanery is romance. And when he ended *McTeague* with an impossibly melodramatic chase, leading to death in the desert, that also was romance!

But if the law of parsimony be applied to literary definitions, Frank Swinnerton's definitions are more useful and accurate. According to Swinnerton, a romance is "a fiction, the chief interest in which is supported by varied incidents of uncommon or obsolete nature". And "realism is applied only to work in which the author's invention and imagination have been strictly disciplined by experienced judgment, and in which his direct aim has been precision rather than the attainment of broad effects". Following these definitions two of Norris's great novels are realistic, and one, to a slight extent, romantic. The minor novels are all romantic.

During 1893-94 Norris wrote a novel of power and brilliance which he never polished and which was not published until 1914. *Vandover and the Brute* is, as it stands, an American masterpiece. It is consistent, accurate and powerful realism. As a study of the progressive degradation of a character, it is comparable to the story of Hurstwood in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. There is always about Norris's characters a certain over-simplification. This fault is particularly obvious in the case of Vandover, who is split rather too neatly into two parts, artist and "brute". But the tragedy is so well wrought out that Vandover's lack of complexity is forgotten. The curve of his life ascends and then plunges downward without the slightest deviation from the inevitable. His corruption and defeat by the "brute" in him is never moralized and the successive struggles to reform which progressively weaken in strength are rendered with brilliance and detachment. There is no palliating, no heightening of tones, no release of emotional intensity, until the end. Why Norris did not always write in this fashion is beyond comprehension. The only explanation possible is that deduced by reference to his astonishing theories. How they led him astray is apparent in his next great novel.

McTeague (1899) is an amazingly detailed description of the life of a stupid, animalistic, unlicensed dentist in the slums of San Francisco. For a convincing study of environmental and human sordidness it is unsurpassed in American literature. Through the story runs the motif of lust for money—greed, in motion picture parlance. The working out of *McTeague's* degradation through his inherent laziness is shrewd and convincing. The corruption of Trina, his wife, by her meanness is never for a moment unreal, and it is entirely inevitable. The convincing report of San Francisco slum life is obviously corrected constantly by reference to actual observation. Its precision is unquestionable. Character and environment are given to us with astonishing realism, and the scene is prepared

for a cathartic ending. But it is not achieved. Inevitable and progressive degradation is heaped upon Trina and her husband, culminating in the sordid murder of Trina by McTeague. Then the cumulative effect is partially (the power of the preparation prevents it being wholly so) destroyed by a melodramatic chase of McTeague by the police through the mines and out into the desert, where he is killed. Not only is this "romantic", but it is meretriciously so, for it is grotesquely incongruous. It is confusion: a confusion of practice by theory.

However, in *The Octopus* (1901) Norris came nearer to realizing his theoretical opinions about the novel. To be sure, *The Octopus* is disorderly and often disjointed, but it is written with a flare and with power. The shift has been made from precise rendition of detail, to a habit of sweeping generalization. *The Octopus* is an epic, not a study. The effect arises from the hugeness of the drama rather than from cumulation of detail. The colors are broad, bright and splashed, rather than precise, subdued and considered. There is no diminution of power, and little falling off of quality. Norris justified his ideas as never before or since. His object was to write the opening volume of a trilogy dealing with the growth, distribution and consumption of wheat. Wheat is conceived of as an impersonal force driving men to their destiny. Into *The Octopus* he injected a passionate, rolling and powerful drama of wheat-growing, and the struggle of the wheat growers with the railroad—the octopus. Probably nowhere in American literature has there been a more constant and frank emphasis on the sexual nature of the fecundity of the earth. Norris rose at points to the frenzy of a believer in a fertility cult—and his imagery is constantly sexual. He conceived also of the earth as communicating to the farmers something of its power. The life is on a plane of primitive strength and abundance. The men and women are distinctly American, and it should be said, in spite of the conflicting influences to which Norris

was subjected, he never deviated from the essential American pattern of life he was at the moment recording. The large and fertile abundance of the life of these American peasants is unmistakably American. No one could for a moment confuse them with Russians, Reymont's Poles, Zola's Frenchmen, Hamsun's Norwegians, Hardy's Englishmen, Sudermann's Germans, or even with Suckow's German-Americans. They are Americans of the old British stock. The struggle with the railroad is, of course, peculiar to America of the 'nineties. Out of it grew various farmers' political rebellions. Norris got excellent drama out of the situation, completely overtopping Hamlin Garland in catching and rendering that particular significance which inheres in the group. In *The Octopus* Norris produced his third and last great novel.

The rest of his work is definitely subordinate. *The Pit* (1903), the second volume of his uncompleted trilogy of wheat, seems to me decidedly weaker and more conventional in form and manner. The eastern literary journals in their reviews, conscious perhaps that Norris had recently died, greeted it more effusively than any previous novel of his. But the note constantly sounded, in some cases the note emphasized, was that it was more conventional in manner and substance. No one's pruderies could possibly be shocked. Yet take out the grain pit scenes and the whole book collapses. The superstructure erected around the grain trading is too extensive and too flimsy to be justified by the central core. The wheat trading does not sufficiently integrate the book. To be sure, the drama is more concentrated, but I am not convinced that it has equal or even approximate power to that in *The Octopus*. On the whole it is a weaker book and gives evidential color to the idea that Norris would not have held out as a rebel for very long. He was, it seems, marked for academic acceptance—and that meant a weakening. *Moran of the Lady Letty* has some splashy, gaudy writing, but it is quite outside his

stronger vein. *Blix* is better. It is written in a swift, clear style, and gives a buoyant picture of Norris's own life in San Francisco, culminating in his successful love affair and his journey east. He wrote to Isaac Marcosson: ". . . don't quote me as admitting that there is a real 'Blix', not in any case 'til after next summer, when, if you happen to be in New York, I should be more than pleased to have you meet her". It is his only excursion into autobiographical fiction and the interest is heightened thereby. *A Man's Woman* is a rapidly written story of Arctic exploration, utilizing the strong man and strong woman idea. It has a certain fascination as a yarn, but not significance. Of his short stories the less said, the better, for he himself held them in supreme contempt.

III

If, after this examination of Norris's novels, there seems to be a discontinuity between his theory and his practice, it need not disturb one. An artist often conquers his theories. Norris's notions about novel writing and the literary personality tell us how he reacted to the dominant social forces of the day. We see now that he lacked penetration and independence in his theories and yet in practice he was a pioneer. Like so many pioneers, he was a bit muddled. There is no denying Norris was a brilliant reporter. The trouble was that reporting could not be relied upon to get him below the surface. For instance, in *The Pit* he caught the shining surface of Chicago very cleverly. He saw a dynamic Chicago—"the new world, western glory that was Chicago". But he did not go deep enough below the surface to find the crooked and brutal Chicago that Theodore Dreiser discovered when he studied the same period some years later. When he did apply himself to analysis he achieved great results as we have seen. Mental confusion, however, allowed him to follow out his idea that the public is always right, and led him to publish books which he himself knew were trivial.

All of the books which have been briefly discussed, except *The Pit*, met with his own disapproval. He wrote of *A Man's Woman*: "It's a kind of theatrical sort with a lot of niggling analysis to try to justify the violent action of the first few chapters". *Moran* was "dashed off in an interval of relaxation". This is honest, but why were they published? Was he deliberately giving the public what they wanted even when what they wanted was trash? The answer can be only in the affirmative, for from internal evidence in the autobiographical *Blix* it seems certain that Norris was very willing to write what the publishers—and the public—wanted. Norris, in so far as he achieved greatness, achieved it in spite of his theories and prejudices. He had greatness thrust upon him by his great talents. Since Norris believed that the artist should as nearly as possible approach to the standards and outlook of the "good citizen", there is every reason to believe that he would eventually have abandoned even his pioneering practice and become completely conventional. He was headed in that direction when he died. This may be deduced from these observations by a conservative critic:

For a good while after the first appearance of *The Octopus*, not much was said aloud about the book. It was a thing painful to read and disquieting to remember . . . *The Pit* is a better constructed and more efficiently handled narrative than its predecessor, but *it is more like other books*. [My italics.]

Norris had previously been, this critic continued, "half taught and superficially civilized". Obviously he could only be accepted when his books became more like other books. His confused ideals would not have kept him permanently among the rebels. A few years more and he would probably have been among the civilized and accepted. Yet, if he was visibly weakening, all recklessness was not abandoned, for just before he died he engineered the publication of the first edition of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*.

THE HISTORY OF THEIR BOOKS

VII. IRVIN S. COBB

by Arthur Bartlett Maurice

SEVENTEEN or eighteen years ago a famous trial, that of Charles W. Morse, held the country's attention. It was a battle marked by the matching of legal strategy and the forensic clash of eminent lawyers but, dominating the courtroom, was the defendant himself—doomed to conviction, yet cool, resourceful, in the grim hour of retribution living the lines of Henley's "Invictus", his head "bloody, but unbowed", "master of my fate" and "captain of my soul". Among those working at the reporters' table was Irvin S. Cobb, writing the story of the trial for the *Evening World*.

One day, leaving the court at the end of a session in company with James Montague, Mr. Cobb expressed his admiration for the courage of the little man on trial. "They can't lick him. A will like his can't be bent or broken. Let them send him to Atlanta. He will become the real ruler of the prison and put it on a business basis; or, if that doesn't interest him, he will find some means of escape." But Mr. Montague did not agree. "They'll break him all right or, rather, the prison will break him. It breaks them all."

Overnight Irvin S. Cobb, the story-teller, was born. He was thirty-five years of age and had already won something of a reputation as a humorist. But with the exception of a twelve-hundred word sketch, published in a Kentucky paper when he was twenty-two and years later elaborated into the grim story, "Fishhead", he had never attempted

fiction. The little man on trial was at once a challenge and an inspiration. Nothing mental would subjugate that spirit; something physical might. Into his mind flashed the idea of the handcuffs, gripping, relentless and with this idea came the story, "The Escape of Mr. Trimm". This, his first story, he still likes best.

Imparting to his wife the rather startling news that their whole scheme of life was about to change, that he had decided to give up a certain livelihood to embark upon the sea of chance, Mr. Cobb took a vacation and in a few days had written the story that he first called "The Grip of the Law". He had been doing some work for *Everybody's Magazine*, then edited by Theodore Dreiser; so he sent the story there. Dreiser liked it, but returned it with the explanation that the man who then owned the magazine had once been a business partner of Charles W. Morse and for that reason would probably object to the publication of the tale. It was then sent to the *Saturday Evening Post* and there, despite the fact that it differed in every way from the general idea of what a *Post* story should be, it was immediately accepted.

In that corner of the Valhalla of Fiction, in which congregate the heroes and heroines of contemporary American writers, a not inconspicuous figure is the Judge Priest who has been the *deus ex machina* of so many of the Irvin S. Cobb tales. Who is or, rather,