

FRANK NORRIS.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

THE projection which death gives the work of a man against the history of his time, is the doubtful gain we have to set against the recent loss of such authors as George Douglas, the Scotchman, who wrote "The House with the Green Shutters," and Frank Norris, the American, who wrote "McTeague" and "The Octopus," and other novels, antedating and postdating the first of these, and less clearly prophesying his future than the last. The gain is doubtful, because, though their work is now freed from the cloud of question which always involves the work of a living man in the mind of the general, if his work is good (if it is bad they give it no faltering welcome), its value was already apparent to those who judge from the certainty within themselves, and not from the uncertainty without. Every one in a way knows a thing to be good, but the most have not the courage to acknowledge it, in their sophistication with canons and criterions. The many, who in the tale of the criticism are not worth minding, are immensely unworthy of the test which death alone seems to put into their power. The few, who had the test before, were ready to own that Douglas's study of Scottish temperaments offered a hope of Scottish fiction freed the Scottish sentimentality which had kept it provincial; and that Norris's two mature novels, one personal and one social, imparted the assurance of an American fiction so largely commensurate with American circumstance as to liberate it from the casual and the occasional, in which it seemed lastingly trammelled. But the parallel between the two does not hold much farther. What Norris did, not merely what he dreamed of doing, was of vaster frame, and inclusive of imaginative intentions far beyond those of the only immediate contemporary to be

matched with him, while it was of as fine and firm an intellectual quality, and of as intense and fusing an emotionality.

I.

In several times and places, it has been my rare pleasure to bear witness to the excellence of what Norris had done, and the richness of his promise. The vitality of his work was so abundant, the pulse of health was so full and strong in it, that it is incredible it should not be persistent still. The grief with which we accept such a death as his is without the consolation that we feel when we can say of some one that his life was a struggle, and that he is well out of the unequal strife, as we might say when Stephen Crane died. The physical slightness, if I may so suggest one characteristic of Crane's vibrant achievement, reflected the delicacy of energies that could be put forth only in nervous spurts, in impulses vivid and keen, but wanting in breadth and bulk of effect. Curiously enough, on the other hand, this very lyrical spirit, whose freedom was its life, was the absolute slave of reality. It was interesting to hear him defend what he had written, in obedience to his experience of things, against any change in the interest of convention. "No," he would contend, in behalf of the profanities of his people, "that is the way they *talk*. I have thought of that, and whether I ought to leave such things out, but if I do I am not giving the thing as I *know* it." He felt the constraint of those semi-savage natures, such as he depicted in "Maggie," and "George's Mother," and was forced through the fealty of his own nature to report them as they spoke no less than as they looked. When it came to "The Red Badge of Courage," where he took leave of these simple æsthetics, and lost himself in a whirl of wild guesses at the fact from the ground of insufficient witness, he made the failure which formed the break between his first and his second manner, though it was what the public counted a success, with every reason to do so from the report of the sales.

The true Stephen Crane was the Stephen Crane of the earlier books, the earliest book; for "Maggie" remains the best thing he did. All he did was lyrical, but this was the aspect and accent as well as the spirit of the tragically squalid life he sang, while "The Red Badge of Courage," and the other things that followed it, were the throes of an art failing with material to which it could

not render an absolute devotion from an absolute knowledge. He sang, but his voice erred up and down the scale, with occasional flashes of brilliant melody, which could not redeem the errors. New York was essentially his inspiration, the New York of suffering and baffled and beaten life, of inarticulate or blasphemous life; and away from it he was not at home, with any theme, or any sort of character. It was the pity of his fate that he must quit New York, first as a theme, and then as a habitat; for he rested nowhere else, and wrought with nothing else as with the lurid depths which he gave proof of knowing better than any one else. Every one is limited, and perhaps no one is more limited than another; only, the direction of the limitation is different in each. Perhaps George Douglas, if he had lived, would still have done nothing greater than "The House with the Green Shutters," and might have failed in the proportion of a larger range as Stephen Crane did. I am not going to say that either of these extraordinary talents was of narrower bound than Frank Norris; such measures are not of the map. But I am still less going to say that they were of finer quality because their achievement seems more poignant, through the sort of physical concentration which it has. Just as a whole unhappy world agonizes in the little space their stories circumscribe, so what is sharpest and subtlest in that anguish finds its like in the epical breadths of Norris's fiction.

II.

At the other times when I so gladly owned the importance of this fiction, I frankly recognized what seemed to me the author's debt to an older master; and now, in trying to sum up my sense of it in an estimate to which his loss gives a sort of finality for me, I must own again that he seemed to derive his ideal of the novel from the novels of Zola. I cannot say that, if the novels of Zola had not been cast in the epic mould, the novels of Frank Norris would not have been epical. This is by no means certain; while it is, I think, certain that they owe nothing beyond the form to the master from whom he may have imagined it. Or they owe no more to him, essentially, than to the other masters of the time in which Norris lived out his life all too soon. It is not for nothing that any novelist is born in one age, and not another, unless we are to except that aoristic freak, the historical novelist; and by what Frank Norris wrote one might easily know what he had

read. He had read, and had profited, with as much originality as any man may keep for himself, by his study of the great realists whose fiction has illustrated the latter part of the nineteenth century beyond any other time in the history of fiction; and if he seemed to have served his apprenticeship rather more to one of them than to another, this may be the effect of an inspiration not finally derived from that one. An Italian poet says that in Columbus "the instinct of the unknown continent burned;" and it may be that this young novelist, who had his instincts mostly so well intellectualized, was moved quite from within when he imagined treating American things in an epical relation as something most expressive of their actual relation. I am not so sure that this is so, but I am sure that he believed it so, and that neither in material nor in treatment are his novels Zolaesque, though their form is Zolaesque, in the fashion which Zola did not invent, though he stamped it so deeply with his nature and his name.

I may allow also that he was like Zola in his occasional indulgence of a helpless fondness for the romantic, but he quite transcended Zola in the rich strain of poetry coloring his thought, and the mysticism in which he now and then steeped his story. I do not care enough, however, for what is called originality in any writer to fatigue myself greatly in the effort to establish that of a writer who will avouch his fresh and vigorous powers to any one capable of feeling them. I prefer, in the presence of a large design left unfulfilled, to note the generous ideal, the ample purpose, forecast in the novel forming the first of the trilogy he imagined.

In one of those few meetings which seem, too late, as if they might have been so many, but which the New York conditions of overwork for all who work at all begrudge, I remember how he himself outlined his plan. The story of the Wheat was for him the allegory of the industrial and financial America which is the real America, and he had begun already to tell the first part of this story in the tragedy of the railroad-ridden farms of California, since published as "The Octopus." The second part, as he then designed, was to carry the tale to Chicago, where the distribution of the Wheat was to be the theme, as its production had already been the theme in the first. The last part was to find its scene in Europe, among the representative cities where the consumption of the Wheat was to form the motive. Norris believed himself peculiarly qualified for the work by the accidents

of his life; for he was born in Chicago and had lived there till he was fifteen years old; then he had gone to California, and had grown up into the knowledge of the scene and action which he has portrayed so powerfully; later, he had acquainted himself with Europe, by long sojourn; and so he argued, with an enthusiasm tempered by a fine sense of his moral and artistic responsibility, that he had within himself the means of realizing the whole fact to the reader's imagination. He was aware that such a plan could be carried out only by years of ardent and patient study, and he expected to dedicate the best part of his strong young life to it.

III.

Those who know "The Octopus" know how his work justified his faith in himself; but those who had known "McTeague" could not have doubted but he would do what he had undertaken, in the spirit of the undertaking. Norris did give the time and toil to the right documentation of his history. He went to California and renewed his vital knowledge of his scene; he was in California again, studying the course of the fact which was to bring him to Chicago, when death overtook him and ended his high emprise. But in the meantime he had given us "The Octopus," and before that he had given us "McTeague," books not all so unlike in their nature as their surfaces might suggest. Both are epical, though the one is pivoted on the common ambition of a coarse human animal, destined to prevail in a half-quackish triumph, and the other revolves about one of the largest interests of modern civilization. The author thought at first of calling "McTeague," as he told me, "The Golden Tooth," which would have been more significant of the irregular dentist's supremacy in the story, and the ideal which inspired him; but perhaps he felt a final impossibility in the name. Yet, the name is a mere mask; and when one opens the book, the mask falls, and the drama confronts us with as living a physiognomy as I have seen in fiction. There is a bad moment when the author is overcome by his lingering passion for the romantic, and indulges himself in a passage of rank melodrama; but even there he does nothing that denies the reality of his characters, and they are always of a reality so intense that one lives with them in the grotesquely shabby San Francisco street where, but for the final episode, the action passes.

What is good is good, it matters not what other things are better or worse; and I could ask nothing for Norris, in my sense of his admirable achievement, but a mind freed to criticism absolute and not relative. He is of his time, and, as I have said, his school is evident; and yet I think he has a right to make his appeal in "The Octopus" irrespective of the other great canvases beside which that picture must be put. One should dissociate it as far as possible from the work of his masters—we all have masters; the masters themselves had them—not because it is an imitation, and would suffer from the comparison, but because it is so essentially different, so boldly and frankly native, that one is in danger of blaming it for a want of conformity to models, rather than for too close a following. Yet this, again, does not say quite the right thing, and what I feel, and wish others to feel, in regard to it, is the strong security of its most conscientious and instructed art. Here is nothing of experiment, of protest, of rebellion; the author does not break away from form in any sprawling endeavor for something newly or incomparably American, Californian, Western, but finds scope enough for his powers within the limits where the greatest fiction of our period "orbs about." The time, if there ever was one, for a prose Walt Whitman was past; and he perceived that the indigenous quality was to be imparted to his work by the use of fresh material, freshly felt, but used in the fashion and the form which a world-old art had evolved in its long endeavor.

"McTeague" was a personal epic, the Odyssey of a simple, semi-savage nature adventuring and experiencing along the low social levels which the story kept, and almost never rose or fell from. As I review it in the light of the first strong impressions, I must own it greater than I have ever yet acknowledged it, and I do this now with the regret which I hope the critic is apt to feel for not praising enough when praise could have helped most. I do not think my strictures of it were mistaken, for they related to the limits which certain facts of it would give it with the public, rather than to the ethical or æsthetic qualities which would establish it with the connoisseur. Yet, lest any reader of mine should be left without due sense of these, I wish now to affirm my strong sense of them, and to testify to the value which this extraordinary book has from its perfectly simple fidelity: from the truthfulness in which there is no self-doubt and no self-excuse.

IV.

But, with all its power, "McTeague" is no such book as "The Octopus," which is the Iliad to its Odyssey.

It will not be suggesting too much for the story to say, that there is a kind of Homeric largeness in the play of the passions moving it. They are not autochthons, these Californians of the great Wheat farms, choking in the folds of the railroad, but Americans of more than one transplantation; yet there is something rankly earthy and elemental in them, which gives them the pathos of tormented Titans. It is hard to choose any of them as the type, as it is hard to choose any scene as the representative moment. If we choose Annixeter, growing out of an absolute, yet not gross, materiality, through the fire of a purifying love, into a kind of final spirituality, we think, with misgiving for our decision, of Magnus Derrick, the high, pure leader of the rebellion against the railroad, falling into ruin, moral and mental, through the use of the enemy's bad means for his good cause. Half a score of other figures, from either camp, crowd upon the fancy to contest the supreme interest, men figures, women figures; and, when it comes to choosing this episode or that as the supreme event, the confusion of the critic is even greater. If one were to instance the fight between the farmers and the sheriff's deputies, with the accompanying evictions, one must recall the tremendous passages of the train-robbery by the crazy victim of the railroad's treachery, taking his revenge in his hopeless extremity. Again, a half score of other scenes, other episodes rise from the remembered pages, and defy selection.

The story is not less but more epical, in being a strongly interwrought group of episodes. The play of an imagination fed by a rich consciousness of the mystical relations of nature and human nature, the body and the soul of earthly life, steeps the whole theme in an odor of common growth. It is as if the Wheat sprang out of the hearts of men, in the conception of the young poet who writes its Iliad, and who shows how it overwhelms their lives, and germinates anew from their deaths. His poem, of which the terms are naked prose, is a picture of the civilization, the society, the culture which is the efflorescence of the wheaten prosperity; and the social California, rank, crude, lusty, which he depicts is as convincing as the agricultural California, which is the ground of his work. It will be easily believed that in the handling

nothing essential to the strong impression is blinked; but nothing, on the other hand, is forced in. The episode of Venamee and Angèle, with its hideous tragedy, and the long mystical epilogue ending almost in anti-climax, is the only passage which can be accused of irrelevance, and it is easier to bring than to prove this accusation.

As I write, and scarcely touch the living allegory here and there, it rises before me in its large inclusion, and makes me feel once more how little any analysis of a work of art can represent it. After all the critic must ask the reader to take his word for it that the thing is great, and entreat him to go see for himself: see, in this instance, the breadth and the fineness, the beauty and the dread, the baseness and the grandeur, the sensuality and the spirituality, working together for the effect of a novel unequalled for scope and for grasp in our fiction.

V.

Fine work we have enough of and to spare in our fiction. No one can say it is wanting in subtlety of motive and delicate grace of form. But something still was lacking, something that was not merely the word but the deed of commensurateness. Perhaps, after all, those who have demanded Continentality of American literature had some reason in their folly. One thinks so, when one considers work like Norris's, and finds it so vast in scope while so fine and beautiful in detail. Hugeness was probably what those poor fellows were wanting when they asked for Continentality; and from any fit response that has come from them one might well fancy them dismayed and puzzled to have been given greatness instead. But Continentality he also gave them.

His last book is a fragment, a part of a greater work, but it is a mighty fragment, and it has its completeness. In any time but this, when the air is filled with the fizz and sputter of a thousand pin-wheels, the descent of such a massive aërolite as "The Octopus" would have stirred all men's wonder, but its light to most eyes appears to have seemed of one quality with those cheap explosives which all the publishing houses are setting off, and advertising as meteoric. If the time will still come for acknowledgment of its greatness, it will not be the time for him who put his heart and soul into it. That is the pity, but that in the human conditions is what cannot be helped. We are here to do something, we

do not know why; we think it is for ourselves, but it is for almost anyone but ourselves. If it is great, some one else shall get the good of it, and the doer shall get the glory too late; if it is mean, the doer shall have the glory, but who shall have the good? This would not be so bad if there were life long enough for the processes of art; if the artist could outlive the doubt and the delay into which every great work of art seems necessarily to plunge the world anew, after all its experience of great work.

I am not saying, I hope, that Frank Norris had not his success, but only that he had not success enough, the success which he would have had if he had lived, and which will still be his too late. The two novels he has left behind him are sufficient for his fame, but though they have their completeness and their adequacy, one cannot help thinking of the series of their like that is now lost to us. It is Aladdin's palace, and yet,

"The unfinished window in Aladdin's palace
Unfinished must remain,"

and we never can look upon it without an ache of longing and regret.

Personally, the young novelist gave one the impression of strength and courage that would hold out to all lengths. Health was in him always as it never was in that other rare talent of ours with whom I associate him in my sense of the irretrievable, the irreparable. I never met him but he made me feel that he could do it, the thing he meant to do, and do it robustly and quietly, without the tremor of "those electrical nerves" which imparted itself from the presence of Stephen Crane. With him my last talk of the right way and the true way of doing things was saddened by the confession of his belief that we were soon to be overwhelmed by the rising tide of romanticism, whose crazy rote he heard afar, and expected with the resignation which the sick experience with all things. But Norris heard nothing, or seemed to hear nothing, but the full music of his own aspiration, the rich diapason of purposes securely shaping themselves in performance.

Who shall inherit these, and carry forward work so instinct with the Continent as his? Probably, no one; and yet good work shall not fail us, manly work, great work. One need not be overhopeful to be certain of this. Bad work, false, silly, ludicrous

work, we shall always have, for the most of those who read are so, as well as the most of those who write; and yet there shall be here and there one to see the varying sides of our manifold life truly and to say what he sees. When I think of Mr. Brand Whitlock and his novel of "The Thirteenth District," which has embodied the very spirit of American politics as American politicians know them in all the Congressional districts; when I think of the author of "The Spenders," so wholly good in one half that one forgets the other half is only half good; when I think of such work as Mr. William Allen White's, Mr. Robert Herrick's, Mr. Will Payne's—all these among the younger men—it is certainly not to despair because we shall have no such work as Frank Norris's from them. They, and the like of them, will do their good work as he did his.

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ELECTRICITY AS A MOTIVE POWER ON TRUNK LINES.

BY CORNELIUS VANDERBILT.

It would be interesting, though not instructive, to know how many people have prophesied, during the past ten years, that the day of the steam locomotive was at an end, and that the era of electricity as the motive power for railways was at hand, for one seldom takes a journey without hearing this view expressed by some fellow-passenger. When one considers the enormous growth of the trolley systems in this country, it seems to the layman—using this term in contra-distinction to that of engineer—quite natural to suppose that a slight extension will result in equipping the present steam roads with electric locomotives or motor cars run in trains. It is the object of this short paper to consider, in a very general way, the reasons for the extension or non-extension of the trolley system, and to draw certain conclusions from an examination of the principles which underlie the question. The conditions to be met in the different parts of the country, caused by the differences in the communities served by the various roads, as well as numerous minor matters, require a different analysis to be made of each line, but certain general principles are the same for all, and we will therefore attempt to examine these, excluding as far as possible any specific railway or group of roads.

From the stand-point of those in charge of the railways in this country, there is only one object in view when a change is made in methods of operation, whether the change be great or small, from the consolidation of a number of roads down to the minutest improvement in rolling-stock. That object is the production of an increased net revenue; and it may be brought about either by a reduction in the cost of transporting freight and passengers, or