Frank Norris

The Third Circle

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Introduction

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It used to be my duty, as sub editor of the old San Francisco *Wave*, to "put the paper to bed." We were printing a Seattle edition in those days of the Alaskan gold rush; and the last form had to be locked up on Tuesday night, that we might reach the news stands by Friday. Working short-handed, as all small weeklies do, we were everlastingly late with copy or illustrations or advertisements; and that Tuesday usually stretched itself out into Wednesday. Most often, indeed, the foreman and I pounded the last quoin into place at four or five o'clock Wednesday morning and went home with the milk-wagons—to rise at noon and start next week's paper going.

For Yelton, most patient and cheerful of foremen, those Tuesday night sessions meant steady work. I, for my part, had only to confer with him now and then on a "Caption" or to run over a late proof. In the heavy intervals of waiting, I killed time and gained instruction by reading the back files of the *Wave*, and especially that part of the files which preserved the early, prentice work of Frank Norris.

He was a hero to us all in those days, as he will ever remain a heroic memory—that unique product of our Western soil, killed, for some hidden purpose of the gods, before the time of full blossom. He had gone East but a year since to publish the earliest in his succession of rugged, virile novels—"Moran of the Lady Letty," "McTeague," "Blix,"

"A Man's Woman," "The Octopus," and "The Pit." The East was just beginning to learn that he was great; we had known it long before. With a special interest, then, did I, his humble cub successor as sub editor and sole staff writer, follow that prentice work of his from the period of his first brief sketches, through the period of rough, brilliant short stories hewed out of our life in the Port of Adventures, to the period of that first serial which brought him into his own.

It was a surpassing study of the novelist in the making. J. O'Hara Cosgrave, owner, editor and burden-bearer of the *Wave*, was in his editing more an artist than a man of business. He loved "good stuff"; he could not bear to delete a distinctive piece of work just because the populace would not understand. Norris, then, had a free hand. Whatever his thought of that day, whatever he had seen with the eye of his flash or the eye of his imagination, he might write and print. You began to feel him in the files of the year 1895, by certain distinctive sketches and fragments. You traced his writing week by week until the sketches became "Little Stories of the Pavements." Then longer stories, one every week, even such stories as "The Third Circle," "Miracle Joyeaux," and "The House with the Blinds"; then, finally, a novel, written *feuilleton* fashion week by week—"Moran of the Lady Letty." A curious circumstance attended the publication of "Moran" in the *Wave*. I discovered it myself during those Tuesday night sessions over the files; and it illustrates how this work was done. He began it in the last weeks of 1897, turning it out and sending it straight to the printer as part of his daily stint. The *Maine* was blown up February 14, 1898. In the later chapters of "Moran," he

introduced the destruction of the *Maine* as an incident! It was this serial, brought to the attention of *McClure's Magazine*, which finally drew Frank Norris East.

"The studio sketches of a great novelist," Gellett Burgess has called these ventures and fragments. Burgess and I, when the *Wave* finally died of too much merit, stole into the building by night and took away one set of old files. A harmless theft of sentiment, we told ourselves; for by moral right they belonged to us, the sole survivors in San Francisco of those who had helped make the *Wave*. And, indeed, by this theft we saved them from the great fire of 1906. When we had them safe at home, we spent a night running over them, marveling again at those rough creations of blood and nerve which Norris had made out of that city which was the first love of his wakened intelligence, and in which, so wofully soon afterward, he died.

I think that I remember them all, even now; not one but a name or a phrase would bring back to mind. Most vividly, perhaps, remains a little column of four sketches called "Fragments." One was a scene behind the barricades during the Commune—a gay *flaneur* of a soldier playing on a looted piano until a bullet caught him in the midst of a note. Another pictured an empty hotel room after the guest had left. Only that; but I always remember it when I first enter my room in a hotel. A third was the nucleus for the description of the "Dental Parlors" in McTeague. A fourth, the most daring of all, showed a sodden workman coming home from his place of great machines. A fresh violet lay on the pavement. He, the primal brute in harness, picked it up.

Dimly, the aesthetic sense woke in him. It gave him pleasure, a pleasure which called for some tribute. He put it between his great jaws and crushed it—the only way he knew.

Here collected are the longest and most important of his prentice products. Even without those shorter sketches whose interest is, after all, mainly technical, they are an incomparable study in the way a genius takes to find himself. It is as though we saw a complete collection of Rembrandt's early sketches, say—full technique and co-ordination not yet developed, but all the basic force and vision there. Admirable in themselves, these rough-hewn tales, they are most interesting when compared with the later work which the world knows, and when taken as a melancholy indication of that power of growth which was in him and which must have led, if the masters of fate had only spared him, to the highest achievement in letters.

WILL IRWIN.
March, 1909.

The Third Circle

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There are more things in San Francisco's Chinatown than are dreamed of in Heaven and earth. In reality there are three parts of Chinatown—the part the guides show you, the

part the guides don't show you, and the part that no one ever hears of. It is with the latter part that this story has to do. There are a good many stories that might be written about this third circle of Chinatown, but believe me, they never will be written—at any rate not until the "town" has been, as it were, drained off from the city, as one might drain a noisome swamp, and we shall be able to see the strange, dreadful life that wallows down there in the lowest ooze of the place—wallows and grovels there in the mud and in the dark. If you don't think this is true, ask some of the Chinese detectives (the regular squad are not to be relied on), ask them to tell you the story of the Lee On Ting affair, or ask them what was done to old Wong Sam, who thought he could break up the trade in slave girls, or why Mr. Clarence Lowney (he was a clergyman from Minnesota who believed in direct methods) is now a "dangerous" inmate of the State Asylum—ask them to tell you why Matsokura, the Japanese dentist, went back to his home lacking a face—ask them to tell you why the murderers of Little Pete will never be found, and ask them to tell you about the little slave girl, Sing Yee, or—no, on the second thought, don't ask for that story.

The tale I am to tell you now began some twenty years ago in a See Yup restaurant on Waverly Place—long since torn down—where it will end I do not know. I think it is still going on. It began when young Hillegas and Miss Ten Eyck (they were from the East, and engaged to be married) found their way into the restaurant of the Seventy Moons, late in the evening of a day in March. (It was the year after the

downfall of Kearney and the discomfiture of the sand-lotters.)

"What a dear, quaint, curious old place!" exclaimed Miss Ten Eyck.

She sat down on an ebony stool with its marble seat, and let her gloved hands fall into her lap, looking about her at the huge hanging lanterns, the gilded carven screens, the lacquer work, the inlay work, the coloured glass, the dwarf oak trees growing in Satsuma pots, the marquetry, the painted matting, the incense jars of brass, high as a man's head, and all the grotesque jim-crackery of the Orient. The restaurant was deserted at that hour. Young Hillegas pulled up a stool opposite her and leaned his elbows on the table, pushing back his hat and fumbling for a cigarette.

"Might just as well be in China itself," he commented.

"Might?" she retorted; "we are in China, Tom—a little bit of China dug out and transplanted here. Fancy all America and the Nineteenth Century just around the corner! Look! You can even see the Palace Hotel from the window. See out yonder, over the roof of that temple—the Ming Yen, isn't it?—and I can actually make out Aunt Harriett's rooms."

"I say, Harry (Miss Ten Eyck's first name was Harriett) let's have some tea."

"Tom, you're a genius! Won't it be fun! Of course we must have some tea. What a lark! And you can smoke if you want to."

"This is the way one ought to see places," said Hillegas, as he lit a cigarette; "just nose around by yourself and discover things. Now, the guides never brought us here."

"No, they never did. I wonder why? Why, we just found it out by ourselves. It's ours, isn't it, Tom, dear, by right of discovery?"

At that moment Hillegas was sure that Miss Ten Eyck was quite the most beautiful girl he ever remembered to have seen. There was a daintiness about her—a certain chic trimness in her smart tailor-made gown, and the least perceptible tilt of her crisp hat that gave her the last charm. Pretty she certainly was—the fresh, vigorous, healthful prettiness only seen in certain types of unmixed American stock. All at once Hillegas reached across the table, and, taking her hand, kissed the little crumpled round of flesh that showed where her glove buttoned.

The China boy appeared to take their order, and while waiting for their tea, dried almonds, candied fruit and watermelon rinds, the pair wandered out upon the overhanging balcony and looked down into the darkening streets.

"There's that fortune-teller again," observed Hillegas, presently. "See—down there on the steps of the joss house?"

"Where? Oh, yes, I see."

"Let's have him up. Shall we? We'll have him tell our fortunes while we're waiting."

Hillegas called and beckoned, and at last got the fellow up into the restaurant.

"Hoh! You're no Chinaman," said he, as the fortune-teller came into the circle of the lantern-light. The other showed his brown teeth.

"Part Chinaman, part Kanaka."

"Kanaka?"

"All same Honolulu. Sabe? Mother Kanaka lady—washum clothes for sailor peoples down Kaui way," and he laughed as though it were a huge joke.

"Well, say, Jim," said Hillegas; "we want you to tell our fortunes. You sabe? Tell the lady's fortune. Who she going to marry, for instance."

"No fortune—tattoo."

"Tattoo?"

"Um. All same tattoo—three, four, seven, plenty lil birds on lady's arm. Hey? You want tattoo?"

He drew a tattooing needle from his sleeve and motioned towards Miss Ten Eyck's arm.

"Tattoo my arm? What an idea! But wouldn't it be funny, Tom? Aunt Hattie's sister came back from Honolulu with the prettiest little butterfly tattooed on her finger. I've half a mind to try. And it would be so awfully queer and original."

"Let him do it on your finger, then. You never could wear evening dress if it was on your arm."

"Of course. He can tattoo something as though it was a ring, and my marquise can hide it."

The Kanaka-Chinaman drew a tiny fantastic-looking butterfly on a bit of paper with a blue pencil, licked the drawing a couple of times, and wrapped it about Miss Ten Eyck's little finger—the little finger of her left hand. The removal of the wet paper left an imprint of the drawing. Then he mixed his ink in a small sea-shell, dipped his needle, and in ten minutes had finished the tattooing of a grotesque little insect, as much butterfly as anything else.

"There," said Hillegas, when the work was done and the fortune-teller gone his way; "there you are, and it will never

come out. It won't do for you now to plan a little burglary, or forge a little check, or slay a little baby for the coral round its neck, 'cause you can always be identified by that butterfly upon the little finger of your left hand."

"I'm almost sorry now I had it done. Won't it ever come out? Pshaw! Anyhow I think it's very chic," said Harriett Ten Eyck.

"I say, though!" exclaimed Hillegas, jumping up; "where's our tea and cakes and things? It's getting late. We can't wait here all evening. I'll go out and jolly that chap along."

The Chinaman to whom he had given the order was not to be found on that floor of the restaurant. Hillegas descended the stairs to the kitchen. The place seemed empty of life. On the ground floor, however, where tea and raw silk was sold, Hillegas found a Chinaman figuring up accounts by means of little balls that slid to and fro upon rods. The Chinaman was a very gorgeous-looking chap in round horn spectacles and a costume that looked like a man's nightgown, of quilted blue satin.

"I say, John," said Hillegas to this one, "I want some tea. You sabe?—up stairs—restaurant. Give China boy order—he no come. Get plenty much move on. Hey?"

The merchant turned and looked at Hillegas over his spectacles.

"Ah," he said, calmly, "I regret that you have been detained. You will, no doubt, be attended to presently. You are a stranger in Chinatown?"

"Ahem!—well, yes—I—we are."

"Without doubt—without doubt!" murmured the other.

"I suppose you are the proprietor?" ventured Hillegas.

"I? Oh, no! My agents have a silk house here. I believe they sub-let the upper floors to the See Yups. By the way, we have just received a consignment of India silk shawls you may be pleased to see."

He spread a pile upon the counter, and selected one that was particularly beautiful.

"Permit me," he remarked gravely, "to offer you this as a present to your good lady."

Hillegas's interest in this extraordinary Oriental was aroused. Here was a side of the Chinese life he had not seen, nor even suspected. He stayed for some little while talking to this man, whose bearing might have been that of Cicero before the Senate assembled, and left him with the understanding to call upon him the next day at the Consulate. He returned to the restaurant to find Miss Ten Eyck gone. He never saw her again. No white man ever did.

*****

There is a certain friend of mine in San Francisco who calls himself Manning. He is a Plaza bum—that is, he sleeps all day in the old Plaza (that shoal where so much human jetsom has been stranded), and during the night follows his own devices in Chinatown, one block above. Manning was at one time a deep-sea pearl diver in Oahu, and, having burst his ear drums in the business, can now blow smoke out of either ear. This accomplishment first endeared him to me, and latterly I found out that he knew more of Chinatown than is meet and right for a man to know. The other day I found Manning in the shade of the Stevenson ship, just

rousing from the effects of a jag on undiluted gin, and told him, or rather recalled to him the story of Harriett Ten Eyck.

"I remember," he said, resting on an elbow and chewing grass. "It made a big noise at the time, but nothing ever came of it—nothing except a long row and the cutting down of one of Mr. Hillegas's Chinese detectives in Gambler's Alley. The See Yups brought a chap over from Peking just to do the business."

"Hatchet-man?" said I.

"No," answered Manning, spitting green; "he was a two-knife Kai-Gingh."

"As how?"

"Two knives—one in each hand—cross your arms and then draw 'em together, right and left, scissor-fashion—damn near slashed his man in two. He got five thousand for it. After that the detectives said they couldn't find much of a clue."

"And Miss Ten Eyck was not so much as heard from again?"

"No," answered Manning, biting his fingernails. "They took her to China, I guess, or may be up to Oregon. That sort of thing was new twenty years ago, and that's why they raised such a row, I suppose. But there are plenty of women living with Chinamen now, and nobody thinks anything about it, and they are Canton Chinamen, too—lowest kind of coolies. There's one of them up in St. Louis Place, just back of the Chinese theatre, and she's a Sheeny. There's a queer team for you—the Hebrew and the Mongolian—and they've got a kid with red, crinkly hair, who's a rubber in a Hammam bath. Yes, it's a queer team, and there's three more white

women in a slave girl joint under Ah Yee's tan room. There's where I get my opium. They can talk a little English even yet. Funny thing—one of 'em's dumb, but if you get her drunk enough she'll talk a little English to you. It's a fact! I've seen 'em do it with her often—actually get her so drunk that she can talk. Tell you what," added Manning, struggling to his feet, "I'm going up there now to get some dope. You can come along, and we'll get Sadie (Sadie's her name) we'll get Sadie full, and ask her if she ever heard about Miss Ten Eyck. They do a big business," said Manning, as we went along. "There's Ah Yeo and these three women and a policeman named Yank. They get all the yen shee—that's the cleanings of the opium pipes, you know, and make it into pills and smuggle it into the cons over at San Quentin prison by means of the trusties. Why, they'll make five dollars worth of dope sell for thirty by the time it gets into the yard over at the Pen. When I was over there, I saw a chap knifed behind a jute mill for a pill as big as a pea. Ah Yee gets the stuff, the three women roll it into pills, and the policeman, Yank, gets it over to the trusties somehow. Ah Yee is independent rich by now, and the policeman's got a bank account."

"And the women?'

"Lord! they're slaves—Ah Yee's slaves! They get the swift kick most generally."

Manning and I found Sadie and her two companions four floors underneath the tan room, sitting cross-legged in a room about as big as a big trunk. I was sure they were Chinese women at first, until my eyes got accustomed to the darkness of the place. They were dressed in Chinese

fashion, but I noted soon that their hair was brown and the bridges of each one's nose was high. They were rolling pills from a jar of yen shee that stood in the middle of the floor, their fingers twinkling with a rapidity that was somehow horrible to see.

Manning spoke to them briefly in Chinese while he lit a pipe, and two of them answered with the true Canton sing-song—all vowels and no consonants.

"That one's Sadie," said Manning, pointing to the third one, who remained silent the while. I turned to her. She was smoking a cigar, and from time to time spat through her teeth man-fashion. She was a dreadful-looking beast of a woman, wrinkled like a shriveled apple, her teeth quite black from nicotine, her hands bony and prehensile, like a hawk's claws—but a white woman beyond all doubt. At first Sadie refused to drink, but the smell of Manning's can of gin removed her objections, and in half an hour she was hopelessly loquacious. What effect the alcohol had upon the paralysed organs of her speech I cannot say. Sober, she was tongue-tied—drunk, she could emit a series of faint bird-like twitterings that sounded like a voice heard from the bottom of a well.

"Sadie," said Manning, blowing smoke out of his ears, "what makes you live with Chinamen? You're a white girl. You got people somewhere. Why don't you get back to them?"

Sadie shook her head.

"Like um China boy better," she said, in a voice so faint we had to stoop to listen. "Ah Yee's pretty good to us—

plenty to eat, plenty to smoke, and as much yen shee as we can stand. Oh, I don't complain."

"You know you can get out of this whenever you want. Why don't you make a run for it some day when you're out? Cut for the Mission House on Sacramento street—they'll be good to you there."

"Oh!" said Sadie, listlessly, rolling a pill between her stained palms, "I been here so long I guess I'm kind of used to it. I've about got out of white people's ways by now. They wouldn't let me have my yen shee and my cigar, and that's about all I want nowadays. You can't eat yen shee long and care for much else, you know. Pass that gin along, will you? I'm going to faint in a minute."

"Wait a minute," said I, my hand on Manning's arm. "How long have you been living with Chinamen, Sadie?"

"Oh, I don't know. All my life, I guess. I can't remember back very far—only spots here and there. Where's that gin you promised me?"

"Only in spots?" said I; "here a little and there a little—is that it? Can you remember how you came to take up with this kind of life?"

"Sometimes I can and sometimes I can't," answered Sadie. Suddenly her head rolled upon her shoulder, her eyes closing. Manning shook her roughly:

"Let be! let be!" she exclaimed, rousing up; "I'm dead sleepy. Can't you see?"

"Wake up, and keep awake, if you can," said Manning; "this gentleman wants to ask you something."

"Ah Yee bought her from a sailor on a junk in the Pei Ho river," put in one of the other women.

"How about that, Sadie?" I asked. "Were you ever on a junk in a China river? Hey? Try and think?"

"I don't know," she said. "Sometimes I think I was. There's lots of things I can't explain, but it's because I can't remember far enough back."

"Did you ever hear of a girl named Ten Eyck—Harriett Ten Eyck—who was stolen by Chinamen here in San Francisco a long time ago?"

There was a long silence. Sadie looked straight before her, wide-eyed, the other women rolled pills industriously, Manning looked over my shoulder at-the scene, still blowing smoke through his ears; then Sadie's eyes began to close and her head to loll sideways.

"My cigar's gone out," she muttered. "You said you'd have gin for me. Ten Eyck! Ten Eyck! No, I don't remember anybody named that." Her voice failed her suddenly, then she whispered:

"Say, how did I get that on me?"

She thrust out her left hand, and I saw a butterfly tattooed on the little finger.

The House With the Blinds

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It is a thing said and signed and implicitly believed in by the discerning few that San Francisco is a place wherein Things can happen. There are some cities like this—cities

that have come to be picturesque—that offer opportunities in the matter of background and local colour, and are full of stories and dramas and novels, written and unwritten. There seems to be no adequate explanation for this state of things, but you can't go about the streets anywhere within a mile radius of Lotta's fountain without realising the peculiarity, just as you would realise the hopelessness of making anything out of Chicago, fancy a novel about Chicago or Buffalo, let us say, or Nashville, Tennessee. There are just three big cities in the United States that are "story cities"—New York, of course, New Orleans, and best of the lot, San Francisco.

Here, if you put yourself in the way of it, you shall see life uncloaked and bare of convention—the raw, naked thing, that perplexes and fascinates—life that involves death of the sudden and swift variety, the jar and shock of unleased passions, the friction of men foregathered from every ocean, and you may touch upon the edge of mysteries for which there is no explanation—little eddies on the surface of unsounded depths, sudden outflashings of the inexplicable—troublesome, disquieting, and a little fearful.

About this "House With the Blinds" now.

If you go far enough afield, with your face towards Telegraph Hill, beyond Chinatown, beyond the Barbary Coast, beyond the Mexican quarter and Luna's restaurant, beyond even the tamale factory and the Red House, you will come at length to a park in a strange, unfamiliar, unfrequented quarter. You will know the place by reason of a granite stone set up there by the Geodetic surveyors, for some longitudinal purposes of their own, and by an