

## FRANK NORRIS

Frank Norris (1870–1902) was still an undergraduate at Berkeley when he began publishing short stories in the San Francisco weekly *The Wave*. He joined the paper in 1896, after postgraduate work at Harvard and a trip to South Africa, where he covered the Jameson Raid as a newspaper correspondent.

That the future author of *The Octopus*, a devastating depiction of the stranglehold of railroad companies on western farmers, should serve his literary apprenticeship on this particular periodical is not without irony, since *The Wave* was started by a publicist for the Southern Pacific Railroad to promote travel to Monterey. It soon evolved into a lively weekly, covering all aspects of San Francisco society, culture, and politics. In the course of his 22-month career as assistant editor, Norris contributed approximately 120 pieces of short fiction, character sketches, book reviews, editorials, theater criticism, and sports columns, along with colorful accounts of the bustling life of the city.

This article, from the January 23, 1897, number, describes a dockside stakeout by a team of Australian and American lawmen awaiting the arrival of a ship carrying a fugitive multiple murderer and reflects Norris's keen interest in crime, an interest that would bear literary fruit in his naturalistic masterpiece *McTeague*, published the year after he left *The Wave* and partly based on a sensational real-life case of domestic murder.

### Hunting Human Game

On the 21st of November in the year 1896 there appeared in one of the newspapers of Sydney, Australia, an advertisement to the effect that one Frank Butler—mining prospector, was in search of a partner with whom to engage in a certain mining venture. It was stipulated that applicants should possess at least ten pounds and come well recommended.

Captain Lee Weller answered the advertisement and accompanied

Butler to the Blue Mountains mining region, in what is known as the Glenbrook district. There Butler shot him in the back of the head and buried the body in such a way that a stream of trickling water would help in its decomposition. But Captain Weller had friends; he was missed; a search was made and it was not long before the detectives discovered the grave and identified the remains.

Meanwhile, news had been brought to the Australian police that another man named Preston had gone into the mountains and never returned. Next the body of this Preston was discovered. Then it was found that another man had disappeared under the same circumstances as those surrounding the vanishing of Weller. Then another and another, and still another. The news of these disappearances ran from end to end of Australia, and the whole police system of the country was brought to bear upon the case. Finally it was found that a man named Lee Weller had applied to the Sailor's Home at Newcastle for a berth on a ship. Seven days later this Lee Weller shipped out of Newcastle before the mast on the British tramp ship *Swanhilda*, bound for San Francisco in coal. This was all the detectives wanted to know. The man calling himself Weller was Butler beyond any doubt, suddenly grown suspicious and resolved upon a bolt. Butler's photograph was identified at once by the Superintendent of the Sailor's Home as the supposed Lee Weller. It was out of the question to overhaul Butler now, but two Australian detectives, McHattie and Conroy, took passage on a steamer for San Francisco, where they arrived some three weeks ago. They outstripped Butler and are now waiting for him to catch up with them. That is the story in brief of this extraordinary criminal who, Mr. McHattie says, has killed—no, assassinated is the word—fourteen men.

I saw the "death watch" the other day—the watch for the tramp collier ship *Swanhilda*—that is being maintained at Meiggs' wharf by seven men, whose business it is to hunt criminals down. There is but little of that secrecy and dark mystery about this famous "death watch" that sensational story-writers would have you believe. The detectives live upstairs in a little two-story house at the end of Meiggs' wharf,

close to the customs offices. I had imagined that I would be met at the door with all sorts of difficulties, that permits and passes would be demanded and explanations and the like; that the detectives would be austere and distant and preoccupied, preoccupied as men are who are watching for a sign or listening for a signal. Nothing of the sort. I tramped in at the open door and up the stairs to the room and sat me down on Mr. McHattie's bed—it's a lounge, but it does for a bed—as unchallenged as if the place had been my own; nor was I armed with so much as a letter of introduction. I was not even asked to show a business card.

The room is a little room, whose front windows give out upon the bay and the Golden Gate. Not a row-boat could pass the Gate without being noted from this vantage point. There were four beds made up on the floor of the room, and Conroy was dozing in one, pretending to read "Phra the Phoenician," the whiles. The other detectives sat about a gas stove, smoking. They were for the most part big, burly men, with red faces, very jovial and not at all like the sleuths you expected to see. They are, however, heavily muscled fellows, with the exception of Conroy, who singularly enough is slighter than any of them, though a trained athlete. I remember that the room was warm. That there were pictures of barks and brigs about the walls, that a pair of handcuffs were in a glass dish on the top of a dresser, and that, lying in a cubby hole of a desk, was Detective Egan's revolver in a very worn case. The detectives impressed one as positively jolly. They told me many funny yarns about the crowd of visitors on the wharf, of the "Branch office of the Chronicle," a room ten feet square, just back of the Customs building, and once when "The Examiner" reporter cried out that a girl was waving a handkerchief from a window on the hill back of the wharf, they made a rush for the rear window of the room, crowding about it like so many boys.

And at that very moment somewhere out there beyond the Faralones a certain great four-masted ship, 58 days out of Newcastle, was rolling and lifting on the swell of the Pacific, drawing nearer to these men with every puff of the snoring trades. Some time within the next

few days the signal from the Merchants' Exchange will be rung in that room, there on Meiggs' wharf, the signal which some of these men have come around half of the world to hear. It will be rung on the telephone bell, and it may come at each instant—it may be ringing now as I write these lines, or now as you read them. It may come in the morning, or while the "watch" is at supper, or in the very dead of night, or the early dawn. May I be there to hear it and to see as well. The scene cannot be otherwise than dramatic—melodramatic even. I want to hear that exclamation "Here she is" that some one is bound to utter. I want to see Egan reach for the revolver in the worn leather case, and Conroy take the handcuffs from the glass dish. I want to see the sudden rousing of these seven men, these same men who waved their hands to the girl in the window, and I want to hear the clatter of those seven pairs of boots going down the stair and out upon the wharf. I fancy there will not be much talking.

*The Wave*, January 23, 1897