

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association  
for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)

Documentary Editing, Association for

---

3-1992

## Frank Norris, Decadent Humorist: The 1897 Version of "The Joyous Miracle"


Joseph R. McElrath Jr.

*Florida State University, [jmcelrath@admin.fsu.edu](mailto:jmcelrath@admin.fsu.edu)*

Gwendolyn Jones

*Florida State University, [GwendolynHarold@clayton.edu](mailto:GwendolynHarold@clayton.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

---

McElrath, Joseph R. Jr. and Jones, Gwendolyn, "Frank Norris, Decadent Humorist: The 1897 Version of "The Joyous Miracle"" (1992). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 587. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/587>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# Frank Norris, Decadent Humorist: The 1897 Version of “The Joyous Miracle”

JOSEPH R. McELRATH, JR., and

GWENDOLYN JONES

The once-popular “Joyous Miracle” is now a distinctly minor short story in the canon of Frank Norris. First given separate publication in England and the United States as a Christmas giftbook in 1906, it was then being recycled for its earning potential as a seasonal offering; for it had already appeared as an 1898 Christmas piece in *McClure’s Magazine* under the title “Miracle Joyeux.”<sup>1</sup> Norris’s contemporaries held it in high regard: for example, the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* found the *McClure’s* version a “charming sketch” and praised its author for succeeding with a difficult-to-handle theme—difficult because its featured character was the son of God, and therefore a risky venture in fiction. Later, in 1909 when the California journalist Will Irwin wrote his introduction to a collection of Norris’s short stories entitled *The Third Circle*, he ranked it with the title story and “The House with the Blinds” as among Norris’s most impressive early efforts.<sup>2</sup> Since 1909, however, no one has characterized it thus; nonspecialists who teach *McTeague* and “A Deal in Wheat” are most likely not even aware of its existence.

A main problem is the overt sentimentality of the story. It proves cloying for those who prefer to see Norris as a progressive writer anticipating the modern sensibility in the manner of Stephen Crane or Ambrose Bierce. When Norris goes for the heartstrings by dotting upon the endearing Jesus who told his disciples to let the little children come unto him, and when he has Jesus miraculously effect a consolation for a heartbroken little tyke, the story disqualifies itself for approval in many late twentieth-century circles. The post-Victorian author of *McTeague* appears a brother-in-arms to the author of *A Christmas Carol*.

Those envisioning the essential Frank Norris as the Zolaesque author of *Vandover and the Brute* and *The Octopus* will be happy to learn, then, that his pragmatic concession to the commercial realities of publishing in 1898 was preceded by a show of the less politely restrained side of his personality seen in the shudder-inducing pages of *McTeague* and many of his early short fictions and essays. One does not find Norris’s iconoclasm or decadent delight in defying taboos in the rewritten 1898 *McClure’s* text, the further bowdlerized 1901 English reprinting in *Windsor Magazine*, or the 1906 book; but the first magazine appearance of “Miracle Joyeux” in 1897 is a different matter. In it one finds Norris playing the part of a cultural vandal who replaces the popular Jesus—meek, compassionate, and ever-forgiving—with an arguably more credible figure whose “human” qualities decidedly override the “Christian” virtues normally emphasized by interpreters of the New Testament.

In both versions of the story, a character named Mervius has begun a tale of his boyhood by explaining that he once saw Jesus do something never recorded in manuscript versions of the Gospels then in circulation in the Holy Lands: he saw Jesus smile. In the version revised in late 1898 for *McClure’s*, Mervius tells Jerome how this event transpired, as follows. A little girl named Joanna is playing with older boys in her village. They are making figures out of clay. Less capable, she creates birds that look like frogs. The boys taunt her, as Jesus is coming toward them. He stops for water and, within a short time, the children have become his intimate friends. Joanna explains her predicament. Jesus then judges her birds the prettiest, touching one which suddenly comes to life and rises toward the heavens with a song. Jesus smiles. Joanna smiles. Jesus then goes up to the city, promising to see them again some day.

This episode replaced a very different one in the original version which was published over a year earlier in *The Wave*, the San Francisco weekly magazine by which Norris was employed as a staff writer and editorial assistant in 1896–98. Appearing in October 1897, it was not a heartwarming Christmas tale but, rather, a chilling descent toward blasphemy crafted for a sophisti-

---

JOSEPH R. McELRATH, JR., is Professor of English at Florida State University. He is Frank Norris’s bibliographer and is presently working on an edition of Norris’s early writings.

GWENDOLYN JONES is a Ph.D. candidate in English at Florida State University.

cated upper-middle-class readership, a *beau monde* San Francisco willing not only to tolerate but also to enjoy a sardonic revisionism. The gospel according to Frank Norris introduces a Jesus with a *fin de siècle* sense of irony and an impatience with human nature like fellow San Franciscan Ambrose Bierce's. When Jesus smiles in the original version, one hesitates to join him and may grimace instead. The canceled episode in *The Wave* reads thus, with obvious typographical errors silently corrected:

"There were in our village two men particularly detestable, one was the village miser, Simon was his name, and so grasping was he, so covetous of gain that he used to cut the copper coins in two and deal in the smallest fractions of money. He lived in a wretched hovel on the outskirts of the town, and starved himself, and denied himself till he was but the shadow of a man; he was a money-lender, a usurer, with only one desire, that of accumulating wealth, the wealth of others. To know that any man possessed more than he, was a veritable anguish for him. He was a bad man, a man without soul or heart, whom everybody hated and who hated everybody.

"The other man was the fuller of the village, who had a bleach-green in the meadow back of my father's sheep folds. After weaving, the women used to take their webs of cloth to him to be whitened. Many a time I have seen the great squares of cloth covering the meadow there, till you would have said the snow had fallen. Septimus was the fuller's name. He was a man as unlovable as was Simon, not that he hoarded wealth, but that he envied others the possession of anything good. He envied my father for his flocks of sheep. He envied my uncle for his vineyards. He envied the miller's daughter when her uncle, at his death, left her a little money. He would envy a man for a pair of new shoes, for a profitable sale, for a good harvest. From year to year this despicable man, this Septimus, went about our village, carping at the good fortunes of his neighbors or his friends, belittling and ridiculing their good luck, secretly chafing and raging the whiles at their greater benefits, and at best he hated and envied Simon the miser.

"Curiously enough these two men were seldom seen apart, though they hated one another. They sought each other's company. Septimus hated and envied Simon for his hoarded wealth, Simon coveted the lands of Septimus' bleach-green, and hated him because he held them in his possession. Both men were greedy according to their natures, and may be a common passion drew them together. At any rate, they boasted and pretended

a great friendship. Well, both of these men had heard of the wonders that the carpenter's son had worked and the benefits and good fortune he could bestow on the deserving, and both, unknown to each other, had secretly determined that if ever the fellow should come into our country they would see what they could get from him.

"And at last one day he came. Usually a great crowd was at his heels, but this time he was alone. I was out in the fields beyond the village, pruning the vines in my father's vineyard. My brother was with me; we were at work on a bit of higher ground overlooking the road that runs from our village over toward the lake. The same where you say this Peter used to fish. Suddenly my brother touched my arm.

"'Look quick, Mervius,' he said, 'there comes the man that father spoke about. That carpenter's son, who has made such a stir.'

"I looked and knew at once that it was he."

Old Jerome interrupted: "You had never seen him before, how did you know it was he?"

Mervius shook his head. "It was he. How could I tell? I don't know. I knew it was he."

"What did he look like?" asked Jerome, interested.

Mervius paused. There was a silence. Jerome's brow looked at the bright coals of the fire, his head on one side.

"Not at all extraordinary," said Mervius at length, "his face was that of a peasant, sun-browned, touched perhaps with a certain calmness, that was all, a face that was neither sad nor glad, calm merely, and not unusually or especially pleasing. He was dressed as you and I are now, as a peasant, and his hands were those of a worker. Only his head was bare. He had a fine brown beard, I remember. There was nothing extraordinary about the man."

"Yet you knew it was he."

"Yes;" admitted Mervius, nodding his head, "yes I knew it was he. He came up slowly along the road near where we boys were sitting. He walked as any traveler along those roads might, not thoughtful, nor abstracted, but minding his steps, or looking here and there about the country. The prettier things, I noted, seemed to attract him, and I particularly remember his stopping to look at a cherry tree in full bloom and smelling at the blossoms. Once, too, he stopped and thrust out of the way a twig that had fallen across a little ant heap.

"When he had come nearly opposite to us I said to my brother, 'Here comes old Simon and Septimus.'

“Sure enough the miser Simon and his inseparable Septimus the fuller had just come around the corner of the road some little distance away. They caught sight of the carpenter’s son and—as every one did—recognized him at once. Simon hastened forward to meet him. Septimus did the same. Simon moved even quicker; Septimus broke into a run. Then the two wretched old men, decrepit and feeble as they were, raced one another like school boys, each trying to outstep his companion so as to be the first to ask the favor of the carpenter’s son.

“Simon arrived a little in advance, and threw himself down on his knees in the road before the man, gasping for breath, and kissing his wooden shoes.

“‘Master, master,’ was all he could cry at first. Then gasping and whining and coughing for breath he cried:

“‘You, who can do everything, do something for me, give me something, look at me, a miserable destitute old man, pinched with poverty in my old age.’ Thus Simon, the richest man in all that part of the country. Then Septimus arrived, and pushing Simon to one side, grovelled almost on his belly, pouring out a torrent of supplication, actually weeping with the anguish of his desire. It was a sickening sight, those two horrible old men, wallowing in the dust of the road, clasping the man’s feet, laying their lean cheeks against his wooden shoes.

“‘Listen to me, listen to me,’ cried Septimus. ‘Simon is a dotard and has money hoarded away in sacks, but I, I—just one little boon, sir, give me something, give me something! You have said that faith could remove mountains, look at me, have I not faith, reward me now, give me a blessing, bring me good fortune, bring me fortune!’

“‘No, no, listen to me,’ shrieked Simon, clawing at his knees. ‘A miracle, a miracle! do a miracle on me, look at my grey beard, help my necessity, me an old man, and poor, poor, poor!’

“‘He lies. You know everything, master; he lies, and you know it; he’s rich, a thousand times richer than I.’

“So they howled and struggled before the carpenter’s son who looked on silent and very calm. I wondered if they would in the end deceive him with their hideous protestations. For a long time he was silent, then:

“‘Yes,’ said he, ‘I will reward you both.’

“I was disappointed and disheartened. They had deceived him after all. They grovelled again before him, vying with one another in the excess of their humility. Then the carpenter’s son spoke

again:

“‘Each one of you may ask in turn for whatever he chooses, and it will be given him upon the instant, I promise.’

“The two old miserables whined and fawned afresh. The man continued:

“‘Only upon the condition that he who asks last shall receive twice the amount of him who asks first.’

“Simon and Septimus sat back upon their heels and looked first at the man and then suspiciously at each other. It was easy to see what was passing in their greedy minds.

“The miser Simon, though quivering with eagerness to take advantage of the man’s goodness, would not for the mean life of him make the first request, lest Septimus should gain twice the amount. Was it for him, the miser, the hoarder of gold to enrich his companion by just twice the amount of his own possessions? Never, never; he would bite out his own tongue first.

“And Septimus, Septimus the Envious, Septimus who was fairly sick each time his neighbor prospered, would he be the first to ask, only that Simon would have twice as much as he, no a hundred times, rather would he be dumb the rest of his life.”

“‘Well,’ said the carpenter’s son, ‘I am waiting.’

“‘Ask, then,’ cried Simon fiercely to his companion, ‘you’ve only to ask.’

“‘I will not,’ shouted Septimus, ‘ask yourself, miser that you are. You who are so greedy of wealth, here now is your chance.’

“‘Am I to enrich you, beggar, by double my own fortune? You who have coveted and envied your friends’ and neighbors’ gains, gain now for yourself, you have only to open your mouth.’

“For a long while they quarreled and raged. Screaming abuse into each other’s faces. Their eyes flamed, their cheeks grew crimson, their lean and knotted fingers twitched and twisted together. The carpenter’s son waited, watching them without a sign or word. Then at last in a fury Simon caught Septimus by the throat.

“‘Ask him then, swine that you are, ask or I will strangle you,’ and with his free hand he struck the old fuller in the face.

“Septimus tore himself away shaking with rage.

“‘Ah,’ he screamed, ‘it has come to that, has it? Very well then, I *will* ask. I will ask the first of this good man, and instead of gaining you will be the loser. Sir,’ he cried, turning to the carpenter’s son, ‘Sir, cause it to happen that I lose an eye.’ ‘So be it,’ was the answer, ‘as you have asked, so be it to you.’

“And we looking on, saw upon the instant, as it were, a film draw over one of Septimus’ eyes. But on the same instant our ears were thrilled with a lamentable wail from Simon.

“‘Blind, blind, blind,’ he yelled, tearing at his sightless eyes. ‘Blind, blind, blind.’ He rose from the ground and ran back along the road toward the town, stumbling and falling and colliding with tree trunks and the angles of the fences. And after him ran Septimus, jeering and hooting.

“‘Oh miser, oh swine, yes blind you are and blind you shall remain.’ But Simon himself fell more than once, for upon one side of him all the world was dark.

“They turned the corner of the road and disappeared, but long after they were lost to view we could hear their wretched outcries.

“‘Blind, blind, blind.’

“‘Blind you are and blind you shall remain, and I, too, am but half as blind as you.’

“For a few moments the carpenter’s son remained looking after them. Then, as they vanished around the bend of the road, I saw him smile. It was a smile partly of pity, partly of contempt and partly of amusement. Then he continued his road. And all that Simon the covetous, and Septimus the envious gained from the bounty of the carpenter’s son was, the one to lose an eye and the other to become totally blind.”

One might assume that biographers had long since turned to such textual evidence as a means of measuring their man. Norris died early—at thirty-two—and remarkably little biographical data survived the destruction of his effects during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. But, in fact, scholars have rarely examined different versions of his texts as sources of hard information on developments in his psychology and professional behavior. The 1898 *McClure’s* version of this story—and its republications in 1901, 1906, 1928, 1929, and 1941—has long concealed the more volatile and self-consciously perverse personality that revealed itself in this and several other late 1890s writings for *The Wave*. Generally speaking, Norris’s move to the publishing Mecca of New York City in early 1898 effected a “taming” of the Schopenhauerian pessimist observable in “The Puppets and the Puppy”; bridled too was the practitioner of “dark humor” seen in “The Associated Un-Charities,” which focuses upon the duping of three blind men; and the comic treatment of wife-beating featured in “Fantaisie Printanniere” is considerably more bold than its analogue in *McTeague*. All three were written for *The Wave* in 1897 at roughly the same time as “Miracle Joyeux.” As has been seen, the Norris of the West Coast was playing the *enfant terrible* in earnest; once on his own in New York, no longer living with his

mother, and needing to make his way as a wholly self-supporting professional, he apparently discovered that behavior of that kind was a luxury he could no longer afford. And thus his turn to the very different kind of fiction that followed *McTeague* in 1899, the sunshiny love idyll *Blix*.

What the sophisticated editor of *The Wave*, John O’Hara Cosgrave, found droll was not what Norris’s new readership—a national one—preferred, or tolerated. Norris would continue to induce the effects for which Literary Naturalists were famous, but the day for larking in the decadent manner had come to an end. Viewed positively, a leveling out and psychological maturation occurred as Norris modified his stride as a professional. Less positively viewed, the change resulted in the loss of an imaginative artist almost as outrageous as Bierce and who anticipated the dark comedic sensibility which came to full flower in the work of Nathanael West.

## Notes

1. The publishing history is as follows: “Miracle Joyeux,” *The Wave* 16 (9 October 1897): 4; “Miracle Joyeux,” *McClure’s Magazine* 12 (December 1898): 154–60; “Miracle Joyeux,” *Windsor Magazine* 13 (May 1901): 665–71; and *The Joyous Miracle* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1906). “The Joyous Miracle” was collected by Doubleday, Doran in *The Argonaut Manuscript Limited Edition and Complete Works*, 1928 and 1929, respectively; it was again given publication by Doubleday as a Christmas giftbook in 1941.

2. J. K. W., “Along Literary Pathways,” *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, 18 December 1898, 26; Will Irwin, “Introduction,” *The Third Circle* (New York: John Lane, 1909), 7–11.

## Syllabus Exchange Service

The Education and Information Committee maintains a file of syllabi for courses devoted to or focused upon documentary editing. A complete file may be obtained at cost of copying and mailing, \$12.

Those whose syllabi have been submitted are requested to provide updatings. Anyone who has recently begun such a course is encouraged to send in a syllabus to be added to the packet.

Please send requests and new or updated materials to Fredrika J. Teute, Institute of Early American History and Culture, P. O. Box 220, Williamsburg, VA 23187.