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# Frank Norris Studies

Keepsake Issue

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*The publication of the twentieth issue of Frank Norris Studies marks the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Society. To commemorate the occasion, this keepsake issue, limited to seventy-five copies, presents a work of art by Norris that has never been reprinted since its 1897 appearance in The Wave. As will be seen, it is not the familiar story of the same title that was published in McClure's Magazine in 1898 and reprinted in Windsor Magazine in 1901; nor is it the work renamed The Joyous Miracle when given book publication by Doubleday, Page & Co. in 1906. The original tale does not offer a sentimental portrait of Jesus of Nazareth; rather, it dramatically illustrates the once-dynamic relationship between the Decadent sensibility and the Naturalistic as Norris made his contribution to New Testament apocrypha.*

## Miracle Joyeux

*The Wave*, 16 (9 October 1897), 4.

Mervius had come to old Jerome's stone-built farm house, across the huge meadow where some half dozen of the neighboring villagers pastured their stock in common. Old Jerome had received a certain letter which was a copy of another letter and so on and so on, nobody could tell how far. Mervius would copy this letter and take it back to his village, where it would be copied again and again and yet again, and copies would be made of these copies till the whole country side would know the contents of that letter, pretty well by heart. It was in this way that those people made their literature. They would hand down the precious documents to their children and that letter's contents would become folklore, become so well known that it could be repeated orally. It would be a legend, a *mythos*, perhaps by and by after a long time it might gain credence and become even history.

But in that particular part of the country this famous letter was doubly important because it had been written by a man whom some of the peasants and laborers and small farmers knew. "I knew him," said old Jerome when Mervius had come in and the two had sat down on either side of the oak table in the brick-paved kitchen. Mervius—he was past seventy himself—slipped off his huge wooden sabots and let his feet rest on the warm bricks near the fireplace, for the meadow grass

had been cold.

"Yes, I knew him," said Jerome. "He took the name of Peter afterwards. He was a fisherman and used to seine fish over in the big lake where the vineyards are. He used to come here twice a week and sell me fish. He was a good fisherman. Then the carpenter's son set the whole country by the ears and he went away with him. I missed his fish. Mondays and Wednesdays he came, and his fish were always fresh. They don't get such fish now-a-days."

"I'll take the letter you have," said Mervius, "—the copy, that is—and my wife will transcribe it, I,—I am too old and my eyes are bad. This carpenter's son now—as you say he set the people by the ears. It is a strange story anyhow."

Old Jerome put his chin in the air. "He was the son of a carpenter, nothing else. We all knew his people, you did and I. His father built the bin where I store my corn, and some stalls in my brother's barn in the next village. The son was a dreamer, anyone could have told he would have perished in the end. The people were tired of him, a mild lunatic. That was all."

Mervius did not answer directly. "I have read this letter," he said, "this fisherman's letter. The man who looks after my sheep loaned me a copy. Peter was not

always with the man, the carpenter's son, one thing he has left out. One thing that I saw."

"That *you* saw," exclaimed old Jerome.

Mervius nodded.

"I saw this man once."

"The carpenter's son?"

"Yes, once, and I saw him smile. You notice this letter never makes record of him smiling."

"I know."

"I saw him smile."

"As how?"

Mervius wrapped his lean old arms under the folds of his blouse and resting his elbows on his knees looked into the fire. Jerome's crow paced gravely in at the door and perched on his master's knee. Jerome fed him bits of cheese dipped in wine.

"It was a long time ago," said Mervius, "I was a lad. I remember I and my brother used to get up early in the cold mornings and run out to the stables and stand in fodder on the floor of the cow stalls to warm our feet. I had heard my father tell of this fellow, this carpenter's son. Did you ever hear," he added turning to old Jerome, "did you ever hear—when you were a boy—did you ever hear the old folks speak of the 'White Night?' My father used to tell of it often. They called it the 'White Night.' At midnight it grew suddenly light, as though the sun had risen out of season. In fact there *was* a sun, or star—something. The chickens all came down from their roosts, the cocks crew, as though at daybreak. It was light for hours. Then towards four o'clock the light faded again. It happened in midwinter. Yes, they called it the 'White Night.' It was strange. You know the followers of this fellow claim that he was born on that night. My father knew some shepherds who told a strange story—however.

"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 crow 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 a-fresh. 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 face. 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."

Mervius stopped and slipped his feet back into his sabots and rose. He took the letter from Jerome and put it in the pocket of his blouse.

"And you saw that?" said Jerome.

Mervius nodded. But old Jerome shook his head in the manner of one unwilling to be convinced.

"He was a dreamer, with unspeakable pretensions. Why his people were laboring folk in one of the villages beyond the lake. His father was a carpenter and built my corn bins. The son was a fanatic. His wits were turned."

"But this thing I saw," said Mervius at the door, "I saw it, I who am speaking to you."

Jerome put his chin in the air.

"A dreamer, we were well rid of him. But I was sorry when Peter went away. He was a good fisherman. Mondays and Wednesdays he came, and his fish were always fresh."