THE LITERARY DIGEST

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DIME NOVELS: Once Hooted at, "Shilling Shockers" Are Prized as "Ephemeral Literature"

The professor adjusted his pince-nez. His eyes blinked. Artistic, tapering fingers touched yellowed, crackly leaves.

"Incredible!" he breathed. "Amazing! A gold mine of study for my students! We shall peruse them all. . . ."

The professor reluctantly withdrew his intellectual nose from the last of a great pile of dime novels completely barricading him.

This recent "discovery" of an Elysian Field of source-material for American literature has brought a torrent of inquiry to Curator Valta Parma of the Rare Book Department of the Library of Congress in Washington.

Colleges and universities over the country are unearthing historical and literary values from thousands of books which were the "yellow sheets" of other generations. The correct title, technically, according to Mr. Parma, foremost American bibliophile, is "Ephemeral Literature."

York "Bob" — "These were not dime novels," he says. "The first ones sold for twenty-five cents in 1840, and then 12½ cents, which was known as a York shilling. The real dime novel did not appear until twenty years later."

The latest request Curator Parma has received comes from a university doctor who is tracing the development of the patriotic idea as exemplified in the once-hooted dime-novel literature.

Because of its size and content, the ephemeral book collection in the Library of Congress forms one of the rarest and most complete collections extant. Its value is not computable. The earliest paper-backs were classified as "cheap ephemeral literature" and were decorated with startling woodcut drawings and represented the real reading of the mass of the American people.

As such, they had a profound national influence. The standard literature of New England was British in origin, while these publications sprang from purely American soil.

The roots of the American historical novel are sunk in the so-called dime novel —the first effort at popular fiction. It began with stories based on the Revolutionary War, then historical fiction of incidents in the War of 1812, the Mexican War and the struggle for Cuban independence, which started about that period. Next, were social studies of life in the underworlds of New York, Boston, Philadelphia and New Orleans; also, the first early stories of the West.

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Beginners—The real dime novels began with the Beadle series, paper-covered booklets bound in orange paper and known as "yellow-backs." This was in November, 1860, the Beadle Publishing Company producing them.

The whole output, under the direction of Orville Victor, maintained a high standard of historical accuracy and was of as much literary merit as was possible under the circumstances. To-day, they are the only source of accurate biographical material of many of the famous frontiersmen and reveal the social conditions of a period in American development that was extraordinary and of very short duration.

As ubiquitous as they were in the beginning, when competition came into the field, the natural urge toward increasing sensationalism made them deluge the country. It might have been called a "Plague of the Pulps."

Opinion—"We can not yet estimate the numerical extent of our collection," says Mr. Parma, "for it is probably the most comprehensive in existence. It is made up of all the survivals of the original copyright deposits and is unexcelled for students who would trace the entire trend of ephemeral literature."

Not only are the Beadle publications

abundantly represented in the Library of Congress, but so are the products of his competitors, DeWitt, Monroe, Street and Smith, with large numbers from the firm of Frank Tousey, Elliott, Thomas & Talbot and T. R. Dawley. Stored away in the stacks of the Library are thousands of original dime novels waiting to be sorted.

Oddity — The Library of Congress has many interesting things to offer. Among others, it has evidence that the smallest printed book in the world is a quarter of an inch long, three-sixteenths of an inch wide and weighs one and one-quarter grains.

It is the complete text of Omar Khayyam's "Rose Garden," translated by Eben Francis Thompson of Worcester, Massachusetts. The book is printed by the Commonwealth Press of Worcester, which has presented to the Rare Book Department of the Library of Congress one of the plates from which it was run off. A copy of the midget manuscript was given to Queen Mary for the Queen's Doll House at Windsor.

There are forty-six quatrains, in all, two to a page, and the volume is stitched and bound in crimson morocco with a gold motif on both covers. This jewel of the Rare Book Collection is kept by Curator Parma in a special cabinet and carries attached to it, a three-by-two-inch tag bearing its detailed pedigree.

Definition—Technically, according to Mr. Valta, who for a decade has tabulated and tended with skill and understanding hundreds of priceless literary treasures for his department, a miniature book is one that is less than four inches high.

"Our collection," he says, "numbers about 800 small books covering all classes of literature. We have a German prayer-book, printed in 1710, with its original velvet binding still intact. Altho the book is smaller than a standard postage-stamp, the type is entirely legible. It was intended to be carried in the glove."

Americans who visit the Rare Book section of the Library are most interested in the miniature children's books, ranging from New England primers to tiny paper-covered Mother Goose melodies.

"The majority of visitors do not know," explains Mr. Parma, "that tiny books were issued by almost every nation and in all languages. When we think of books published in the fifteenth century, the group known as *Incunabula*, we generally picture them as huge leather-covered volumes, but several books in the miniature class were printed during the first fifty years of printing in Europe. We have a number in our own collection. The smallest of these is three and one-eighth inches high and the printing was completed on March 23, 1500."

Singular—The collection he refers to contains material used in religious orders and is illustrated with quaint woodcuts. Ap-

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Curator Parma tends tiny books

parently this is the only known copy, as no other has been recorded by any bibliographer.

Another tiny book, printed in Venice in 1489, is called "The Rule of St. Benedict." Not only is it illustrated with woodcuts, but the first initial is illuminated with a miniature of St. Benedict. The volume is in a contemporary binding, with the original clasps.

"The Rule of St. Benedict" is responsible for the preservation of much medieval and classical literature—existing only in script—from being completely lost, because St. Benedict suggested the monks make use of their spare time by copying the manuscripts.

Origin—The actual origin of the entire Library of Congress was the private library of Thomas Jefferson, now housed in the Rare Book section, near the midget collection. There are 6,760 volumes in the Jefferson collection, bought in 1815 as a starting-point for a valuable book repository. The books bought by Congress in 1800 "for the use of both houses" were burned by the British.

A Goliath volume, antithesis of the midget books, housed in another wing of the Rare Book section, is three and a half feet tall by two feet wide. It is called the "Elephant Folio" of Audubon and contains life-sized portraits of the wild turkey and the American eagle. Each bird is colored and the pictures are natural size.

There also is an 1827 Audubon and a Catesby of 1731.

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Curator Parma says his one desire is that the people of the United States regard all the treasures housed in the Rare Book Department of the Library of Congress as their own and use them as such as often as possible.


SECRET SERVICE
OLD AND YOUNG KING BRADY, DETECTIVES.
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No. 225. NEW YORK, MAY 15, 1903. Price 5 Cents.
THE BRADYS AND THE FIRE MARSHALL
OR, HOT WORK IN HORNERSVILLE.
By A NEW YORK DETECTIVE
Old King Brady lifted the girl up in the blinding smoke, and Harry caught her under the arms as she came forward through the window. He braced himself on the ladder with his legs.