The New
REPUBLIC
August 2, 1922

Dime Novels

TIME is the satirist in its recompense as in its revenge. Who of that youthful generation who read Dime Novels stealthily and by night, with expense of spirit and waste of shame, imagined that he would one day review his sins by broad daylight in the exhibition room of the New York Public Library? There is exposed a complete set of the once outlawed publications of Beadle and Adams. The thin volumes which were wont to lie so flat under pillows or slip so readily into pockets are now enshrined in glass cases, and the yellow covers and inky pages which suffered such persistent search and seizure and were burnt so freely as literary garbage are now gathered and appraised as prizes of the bibliophile. Authors, publishers and collectors shine in the light of public recognition. The original Beadle is no longer a corrupter of youth. His photograph reveals a Methodist deacon of the type known as "shrewd but kindly." He might have been one of the Smith Brothers. His house at Cooperstown, likewise in photograph, is unquestionably the home of modest worth. His partner, Adams, is younger, more active, with moustache instead of beard, in public service obviously a Sunday school superintendent, as virtuous as John R. Mott. The collector, Frank P. O'Brien, is given credit for scholarly zeal and acumen, not suppressed as a degenerate. Most significant of all the exhibition is described not as Americana, but defiantly, brazenly, alluringly as Dime Novels.

With this whole phase of literature before us for survey, it is easy to see how this little ill-famed sister of the American novel, in her meretricious charms and draggled elegance, copies faithfully and pathetically the interests and manners of her dignified elder. Mr. Van Doren points out that there are three chief matters of American fiction —the frontier, the sea, and the revolution. The frontier was the theme which belonged primarily and peculiarly to America, and first gave distinction to American fiction in the stories of Cooper, Irving, Simms. These belong chiefly to the second third of the century; in the last third, which was the flowering period of Beadle and Adams, the frontier moved from the Missouri to beyond the Rockies. The Boys' Library pays perfunctory tribute to Daniel Boone, Kit Carson and other early empire builders; but the chief favorites were the contemporary figures. There were "Grizzly" (J. C.) Adams, whose exploits among bears gave him his name: and his nephew "Bruin" (J. F. C.) Adams who succeeded him. The latter was both author and hero, as was the most famous figure of the series Colonel W. F. Cody, Buffalo Bill. Among the frontier writers were Captain Mayne Reid and Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.

The sea was a second source of experience and adventure in colonial American life, and furnished the second interest in legitimate American fiction. It divided with the wilderness the attention of the first American novelist. In the Dime Novel, however, it plays a smaller part, perhaps because during the Civil War the American merchant marine disappeared, the whaling fleet followed, and the country turned its back as it were to the

Atlantic and faced to the west. Roger Starbuck seems to have been the most prolific author of sea stories.

The third matter, the revolution, is amply represented, and the titles are attracting—Stella the Daughter of Liberty; A Tale of the War of '76 by N. C. Iron, and Mad Dan, the Spy of '76, by M. Quad. It seems rather strange that the Civil War, which began when Beadle had been publishing for four years, did not furnish material for a larger number of stories. Probably the events were too immediate, the tragedy too intimate. Instead of fiction we find a great number of biographies of the Union generals, Grant leading off with the fullest beard on the cover, doubtless prophetic of the richest legend inside. The themes of American fiction after the Civil War appear with the romance of transportation, from the pony express and stage coach threatened by Indians, to the railroad in conflict with train robbers. Business success and the danger and temptations of the city ire treated in Albert W. Aiken's City Life Series.

Beadle and Adams did not depend entirely on fiction. They exploitd the tastes of their public in morals, manners, eforms, amusements, by a series of handbooks. The respect in which oratory was held in the political period of American history and the place of declamation in education, are attested by the numbers of speakers which the firm put forth, the Hail Columbia Speaker representing the pure type of patriotic oratory, the Spread Eagle Speaker, a more ornate phase of eloquence, and the Serio-Comic Speaker presumably a descent to the grotesque. The Temperance Speaker marks the application of oratory to a specific reform. A book of etiquette appears; deportment may be cultivated for a dime; and then a considerable number of manuals of sports ranging from chess to croquet. Altogether the Beadle-Adams outfit as it is spread before us by the piety of Mr. O'Brien resembles the complete works of Daniel Defoe. The interests of the American of the latter part of the nineteenth century were not far removed from those of the Englishman of the early eighteenth. The proportion of fiction in Beadle's collection is much greater, it is true, corresponding to the mmense vogue which fiction had attained since Defoe wrote his model tale of the frontier in Robinson Crusoe; but the disapprobation of the sensationally untrue which Defoe had to meet had certainly not grown less.

The reasons for the extravagant disapproval with which the Dime Novel was regarded in the period of its splendor and danger are today rather difficult to reestablish. Surely, the tales would pass the strictest guard of the movie censor. Their action invariably tends toward the inculcation of virtue; crime regularly meets its proper punishment; they scrupulously avoid picturing what the censors refer to unctuously as the degradation of womanhood. The truth is that the Dime Novel was regarded as something worse than a waste of time. There had been periods when the virtues of the pioneer, his enterprise, his self-reliance, his courage, his romantic love for the wilderness, had been necessary to the development of the country. That time was passing. To excite admiration for

such qualities was to introduce an element of restlessness and disquiet in communities in which flannel shirt and bowie knife had given place to white collar and lead pencil. The boy whose head was full of Indians and gold and bears and mountains was more likely to become a train robber than a useful citizen. In like manner there had been a time when a taste for the sea had been a preparation for life in young America; it was no longer so. The fact that Dime Novels were socially unprofitable because they unfitted youth for careers in ordered society was translated into moral reprobation of a more absolute sort, the deeper because of the strength of the temptation. It was wrong to read Dime Novels because they were so interesting. Like the movies today they were a moral danger because they were so much more attractive than school, church, Sunday school, or "good" reading. And in wandering through Mr. O'Brien's collection one realizes that the moving picture of today has little in the way of sensational appeal over the static picture of yesterday. Here is the frontispiece of one of Bruin Adams' tales, representing two men and a bear just toppling over the edge of a precipice to the line: "And there clinging together they went over into the empty void, still locked in that deadly embrace." Here is the cover of one of Albert W. Aiken's City Life Series, on which appears a close-up of Gentleman George, the flowing villainy of whose moustache reminds one perfectly of Blackie Daw. One is tempted to break the glass case to get at the volume introduced by the picture of an iceberg giving birth to an enormous elephant, ready for battle.

A second objection to the Dime Novel was the violent and uncouth speech of most of the characters. It was speech never heard on the lips of

mortal men, until it was faithfully copied by youthful readers. Further protest was registered against the preposterous titles. An alliterative extravagance which today is merely humorous was regarded in the sensitive period of the later nineteenth century as a sin against the Holy Ghost of culture.

The title, of course, came to be a convention without which the Dime Novel would not have known itself, but in style it could assume propriety playfully at variance with its libertine character. One suspects that his tongue was in Colonel Cody's cheek when he passed from the title of his romance, "Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West or the Buckskin Braves of the Platte", to the first sentence: "Silently, beautifully the snow floated down casting over the earth its downy covering."

Beadle began to publish cheap reading matter in 1857. Thenceforward until 1897 there flowed from the establishment in William Street a constant stream of pamphlets and magazines. Toward the close of the period the stream diminished and at last went dry. So long as the West remained in the forefront of public interest, and Custer's last fight and the Battle of the Big Hole were first page sensations, its popular literature flourished; when it passed, its material became remote and exotic, to be revived with the dignity of romance in Owen Wister's Virginian, as themes of piracy and buried treasure are revived in Treasure Island.