

THE DIME NOVEL IN AMERICAN LIFE

BY CHARLES M. HARVEY

I

ARE not more crimes perpetrated these days in the name of the dime novels than Madame Roland ever imagined were committed in the name of liberty? It looks that way. Nearly every sort of misdemeanor into which the fantastic element enters, from train robbery to house-burning, is laid to them.

But these offending books must be only base counterfeits of the originals of their name. When the average American of fifty years of age or upward hears about dime novels he thinks of Beadle's. They were the first and the best of their order. Although nearly all of them bubbled over with thrills, they were not of a character to provoke breaches of the peace. For a few years they had a great run, incited many imitations, all of a lower grade; and at length, after suffering a gradual deterioration in quality, dropped out under the competition. Many of Beadle's original novels deserved the social and financial conquests which they won.

What boy of the sixties can ever forget Beadle's novels! To the average youngster of that time the advent of each of those books seemed to be an event of world consequence. The day which gave him his first glimpse of each of them set itself apart forever from the roll of common days. How the boys swarmed into and through stores and news-stands to buy copies as they came hot from the press! And the fortunate ones who got there before the supply gave out — how triumphantly they carried them off to the rendezvous, where eager groups awaited their arrival! What silver-tongued orator of any age or land ever had such sympathetic and enthusiastic audiences as did the happy youths at those trysting-

places, who were detailed to read those wild deeds of forest, prairie, and mountain!

And how those heroes and heroines and their allies, their enemies and their doings, cling to the memory across the gulf of years! The writer of this article has a far more vivid picture of some of the red and white paladins whom he met in Beadle's pages than he has of any of Red Cloud's, Spotted Tail's, or Black Kettle's fierce raiders, whom he saw at unpleasantly close range, or of the white warriors who alternately defeated them and were defeated by them, in the irruptions into Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Wyoming, in the later sixties and early seventies. Through Beadle's hypnotic spell, —

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven.”

Soon after the middle of the nineteenth century the Beadles began selling ten cent books, each a complete work in its field. They comprised manuals of games of many kinds, family medicine, etiquette, letter-writing, dreams, cookery, prose and poetical quotations, and so on. Most of these attained such a sale that the publication of little books on American adventure suggested itself.

Irwin P. Beadle, his brother Erastus F. Beadle, and Robert Adams were the founders of the Beadle publications. Orville J. Victor was the editor. Beadle's dime novels, issued once in each month at first, but much oftener subsequently, made their appearance in 1860. Many Americans who were old enough to read at that time remember 1860 better from that circumstance than they do because it was the year of Lincoln's election and the secession of South Carolina.

These little books ranged from 25,000

to 30,000 words, or about a third of the average bound novel of to-day. Conveniently shaped for the pocket, they promptly became an inseparable part of the outfit of the boy (and to some extent of the girl also) of the period. Their paper covers were salmon-colored. And they were just as free from yellowness on the inside as they were on the outside.

Orville J. Victor organized victory for the house of Beadle. He selected some writers of ability and standing to contribute to his series. He discovered other writers who made reputations in higher fields of literature afterward. He invented a few writers who quickly "made good." Rules of possibility, morality, and action in the narrative were laid down by him, which all writers had to observe. Mr. Victor himself, who, at the age of eighty, is to-day not only alive but also mentally and physically alert, had done some good journalistic and literary work before the first of Beadle's novels was issued. He had edited two or three papers, was a leading contributor to *Graham's Magazine*, a well known periodical of the days just before the Civil War, and had written some short biographies of Paul Jones, Israel Putnam, and other American heroes.

A contributor to the *North American Review*, writing a little over forty years ago in that periodical, said this:—

"A young friend of ours was recently suffering from that most harassing of complaints, convalescence, of which the remedy consists in copious draughts of amusement, prescribed by the patient. Literature was imperatively called for, and administered in the shape of Sir Walter Scott's novels. These did very well for a day or two, when, the convalescence running into satiety of the most malignant type, a new remedy was demanded, and the clamor de profundis arose: 'I wish I had a dime novel.' The coveted medicament was obtained, and at once took vigorous hold of the system."

That was a typical boy of the sixties.

There were millions like him, as well as many thousands of girls, back in the spacious times of Abraham Lincoln.

Malaeska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter, by Mrs. Ann S. Stephens, published in the summer of 1860, was the first of Beadle's dime novels. Although forgotten long since, Mrs. Stephens was as well known to the literary world of that year as Edith Wharton or Mrs. DeLand is to that of 1907, and she was much better known to the social world than is either of these writers.

Like many greater novelists of the olden day,—Scott, Cooper, and others,—Mrs. Stephens began her chapters with a poetical quotation; but she departed from most of her contemporaries and predecessors in rejecting the "happy ending." The time of the tale, the eighteenth century, saw a large part of the country east of the Alleghenies still in possession of the red man. After her father killed her white husband, Malaeska carried their child to her father-in-law Danforth in New York City (a town which was more familiar with sights of the blanket Indian than Tahlequah or Pawhuska is to-day), was prevented by Danforth from revealing her relationship, and went back alone to her tribe. Years afterward she returned, met her son just as he was about to be wedded, told him of his Indian blood, and in the general catastrophe he killed himself and she died.

The plot was crude, but there was action in it. Editor Victor always insisted on action in his stories. In Malaeska herself there was some vitality. A little of the aroma of the forest swept through the book's pages. Mrs. Stephens received \$250 for the story; but the compensation for these tales usually ranged from \$100 to \$150.

Harry Cavendish's *Privateer Cruise*, Mrs. Metta V. Victor's *Backwoods Bride*, and Col. A. J. H. Duganne's *Massasoit's Daughter* were a few of the best known of the earlier Beadle's. Mrs. Victor was the wife of the editor of the series, and

she had won some reputation as a writer before she appeared in this company. She wrote half a score of stories for the Beadles. By far the most popular of them all was *Mammy Guinea and Her Plantation Children*.

Mammy Guinea was a tale of slave life, and appeared in the early part of the Civil War. It was spirited and pathetic, and had a good deal of "local color;" its sales exceeded 100,000 copies, and it was translated into several languages. "It is as absorbing as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," was the judgment which Lincoln was said to have passed on it. The *New York Tribune*, the *New York Evening Post*, and other prominent papers in that day of large deeds, when newspaper space was valuable, gave some space to Mrs. Victor's story.

One day in the fall of 1860 a bustling youth of twenty crossed from the wilds of New Jersey, entered the office at 141 William Street, New York, and laid a manuscript on the desk of Editor Victor. It was a great moment in the annals of the house of Beadle. The boy was Edward S. Ellis. The manuscript told the adventures of *Seth Jones, or the Captive of the Frontier*, the most successful novel which ever bore the Beadle imprint.

A few years later Dr. Ellis, who is alive to-day, graduated from the 10-cent into the \$1.50 class of fiction writers, and he has also, in the past fifth of a century, written histories and educational works, some of which have been very popular. His juveniles, many of which have been translated into several languages, exceed in number the sixty-seven years of his life. His readers, diffused through America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the islands of the sea, won't allow him to stop. As a writer of Indian tales he easily holds the world's long-distance record.

"How de do? How de do? Ain't frightened, I hope. It's nobody but me, Seth Jones of New Hampshire."

As read to-day, these words, for thousands of Americans, will rouse recollections which will turn time's flight back-

ward several decades. This salutation was Seth Jones's introduction to Alfred Haverland (and likewise to the reader of the story) at Haverland's clearing in the wilderness of Western New York near the close of the eighteenth century. They may also serve to recall, faintly at least, the woodcut picture on the cover of the book, of a stalwart bearded man garbed in fringed hunting shirt, fringed breeches, and coonskin cap, and armed with rifle, powder-horn, and knife. To-day, costume, armament, and picture would strike the observer as archaic; but on the scale of their time all were adequate.

Seth, who had been a scout among the Green Mountain boys under Ethan Allen in the war of the Revolution a few years earlier, and who was fully equipped in the tricks of the fighting frontiersman's trade, told Haverland that the Indians of the vicinity were about to go on the war-path again, and his warning was immediately verified by the capture of Haverland's sixteen-year-old daughter Ina, and by the burning of Haverland's house just as the latter and his wife had fled from it to seek refuge at a white settlement twenty miles away. Just at this moment Evarard Graham, a sweetheart of Ina, turned up, and, under Seth's leadership, joined in the cautious pursuit of the Indians and their captive. After some wonderful, though not inherently impossible, adventures, lasting several days, Ina was recovered, and she and her rescuers reached the settlement and safety.

About this time it was divulged that Seth Jones was a myth, that his real name was Eugene Morton, and that his uncouth garb and language were a mask which he assumed in searching the frontier for his affianced, Mary Haverland, sister of the backwoodsman in the tale, from whom he had become separated during the Revolutionary War. He discovered her soon after he met Alfred at the clearing; but he postponed revealing himself until the clouds rolled by. There was a double wedding—Ina

and Graham, Mary and Morton — with a fiddler and revelry as accompaniments. And then —

“Slumber, with the exception of the sentinels at the block house, fell upon the village. Perhaps the Indians had no wish to break in upon such a happy settlement, for they made no demonstration through the night. Sweetly and peacefully they all slept. Sweetly and peacefully they entered on life’s duties on the morrow. And sweetly and peacefully these happy settlers ascended and went down the hillside of life.”

Believing that this tale could be made a “best seller,” the counting-room rose to the occasion with Napoleonic audacity. One morning the residents of most of the big towns of the United States found staring at them from gutters and dead walls the words, “Seth Jones,” which were followed a week afterward by “Who’s Seth Jones?” The book’s appearance on the news-stands in immense stacks a few days later answered that query. This booming and the plaudits of its readers quickly exhausted several editions, and sent the sales ultimately up to more than 600,000 copies, in half a dozen languages.

The Civil War, which started about three quarters of a year after the advent of Beadle’s novels, opened a new and vast market for them. In their leisure moments the soldiers craved cheap and exciting reading. Beadle bundled it like bales of hay and sent it to them in carloads. And, in their rate of increase, the carloads kept step with the expanding armies.

Mrs. Stephens, Col. Duganne, Mrs. Victor, Mrs. Mary A. Denison (who wrote *Chip, the Cave Child*, and a few other novels for this series) and Dr. Ellis, fairly represented the Beadle contributors when the corps was at its best estate. Of all the persons connected with these publications in their great days, only Ellis, Mrs. Denison, and Editor Victor are alive to-day.

Prosperity killed Beadle. He would

have done better had he done worse. The streams of money which flowed to him made 141 William Street seem, to some envious persons, like a branch of Secretary Chase’s United States Treasury. Rivals sprang up in New York, Boston, Chicago, and other places, who pandered to passions which Beadle shunned. These soon began to take away many of his patrons, and with the hope of regaining his ascendancy he lowered the tone of his publications. It was vain. The days of his supremacy never returned.

The blow which hit Beadle first and hardest came from his own household. “Over there is a man,” said Erastus F. Beadle, the head of the firm, one day, to one of his leading contributors, “who will be content with his routine work forever.” He referred to George Munro, who was a bookkeeper for the house. The original partners had by that time been reduced in number by the withdrawal of Irwin P. Beadle, leaving in the concern Erastus F. Beadle and Robert Adams. Less than a year after Beadle passed this judgment, Munro stepped out, hunted up Irwin P. Beadle, and the two began publishing Munro’s “Ten Cent Novels.” That was in 1866. With the Munro competition began the decline and fall of the house of Beadle.

Munro’s novels won a large patronage from the start, and in connection with these he drifted into other fields of publication, establishing the *Fireside Companion* in 1867, and beginning the “Seaside Library” in 1877. The latter contained the work of many foreign writers of ability. At the time of his death in 1896 Munro had amassed a fortune of ten million dollars.

Beadle’s pocket-form publications were changed into the large folio page “Beadle’s Dime Library” in 1876, and the name Beadle and Adams still figures on dime and half-dime publications issued by N. J. Ivers and Company, New York. But the glory of the house of Beadle vanished when the pocket-form tales passed on.

II

By the close of the seventies several sorts of "dime," "half-dime," and "nickel" novels appeared, the Indian eventually dropping out as the reservation corraled him, and the cowboy, the detective, and the train robber taking his place. At length the dime novel—a term applied to all the cheap fiction indiscriminately—became an atrocity. Many are published to-day in the United States, and almost as many like them in quality and scope are printed in England.

Not all the dime novels, though, even of to-day, deserve this epithet. Between some of them and some of the bound novels the only recognizable difference is the difference between ten cents and \$1.50.

Of the writers of the "dimes" and the "half-dimes" of the past third of a century the best were Thomas C. Harbaugh, Albert W. Aiken, Edward L. Wheeler, Joseph W. Badger, Jr., and Col. Prentiss Ingraham. There are whole "libraries" of Buffalo Bill "dimes," but Ingraham wrote most of them. Bill himself is credited with the authorship of about a dozen of them. Among them is *Death Trailer, the Chief of the Scouts, or Life and Love in a Frontier Fort*. As Colonel Cody had seen something of life, and possibly of love, at frontier posts, the reader would presume that this book would be the "real thing." It starts out briskly, as most of the "dimes" did:—

"Mingling with the rumble of wheels and the rattle of hoofs upon the stone road, came the clear notes of a bugle, piercing the deepest recesses of the chaparrals, and floating far off over the prairie until the sound died away upon the evening air. Suddenly out of a dense piece of timber dashed a horseman, well mounted, and wearing the uniform of an officer of the cavalry of the United States army."

Dime novel horses never trot or walk,—they always gallop. The officer who dashed out of the timber was Col. Hugh Decatur, the place was Texas, near the

Rio Grande, and the colonel, with his daughter Helen and an escort of four dragoons, was on the way to Nebraska, where he was to take command of a military post. After a breathless succession of encounters with Cortina's Mexican guerrillas, road agents, renegade jayhawkers, and villains of a promiscuous and desperate order of villainy,—in which regulators, avengers of different kinds, British noblemen, and other titled personages figure, and in which daylight is let into many sorts of mysteries,—the end came at Castle Glyndon, in England, where Helen became Lady Radcliffe.

Injun Dick, Detective, or Tracked from the Rockies to New York, is a typical tale by Aiken, who was probably the most skillful, and nearly the most prolific, of writers of detective stories.

"You have seen your last sunrise, as I am going to shoot."

Thus the story opened. There was no preface. In dime novels deeds and not words talk. Scene: A mining camp on the Bear River, in southwestern Colorado. Personages: Dick Talbot, hero of a score of Aiken's tales; Joe Bowers, another Aiken favorite; Limber Bee, and Limber's wife, Alethea, "about twenty-five, tall and queenly, with the most magnificent hair, and eyes black as the raven's wing." Limber, drunk as usual, and insanely jealous of Talbot, was to be the executioner, and Talbot the victim.

"You have been trying to separate me from my wife, the peerless Alethea, and you must die."

Right here Joe Bowers's frying-pan, loaded with flapjacks, hit Limber in the face; he went down under the blow; the bullet intended for Talbot flew wide of the mark, and Talbot sprang upon him and held him down until he begged for mercy. Alethea, angry at Talbot for sparing Limber, revenged herself subsequently on both by running away with a mysterious stranger, who assassinated Limber, and by making off with Talbot's, Bowers's, and Limber's gold, hidden in their cabin. Tracked across the

continent, the stranger, who turned out to be Malachi Everest, a notorious burglar, was encountered red-handed in robbing a safe in New York, and killed by Talbot.

Aiken had a record of one story a week for a long time. When pressed, Wheeler and Badger often equaled this gait. Some of the dime-novel writers had several aliases. Col. Thomas C. Harbaugh wrote under his own name and those of Capt. Howard Holmes and Maj. A. F. Grant (in the "Old Cap. Collier" series). Though retired from the dime providing business, Col. Harbaugh is an active contributor to-day to literary papers in Chicago and other places.

The most prolific, however, of all the dime novelists was Col. Prentiss Ingraham, who wrote more than six hundred cheap stories in all, besides many plays and poems. One of his "dimes," forty thousand words, was written on a "rush" order in twenty-four hours, and that was before the popularization of the typewriter. It has been mentioned here that Ingraham wrote most of the Buffalo Bill stories. Ingraham had been an officer in the Confederate army, and afterward served under Juarez in Mexico, in the Austrian army against Prussia, in Crete against Turkey, and in part of the Cuban war of 1868-78 against Spain; and he had traveled widely in Europe, Asia, and Africa. He led a far more adventurous life than Buffalo Bill, and more adventurous than did the hero of almost any of his own tales. In *A Rolling Stone*, one of Beadle's books, his friend William R. Eyster, a well-known dime novelist, told some of the story of Ingraham's life. In the past quarter of a century the average compensation to Aiken, Ingraham, and their associates was \$150 for writing "dimes," and \$100 for "half-dimes."

III

What did the dime novel stand for? What influence did it have on the minds of its readers? What forces did it repre-

sent in the evolution of American society?

The aim of the original dime novel was to give, in cheap and wholesome form, a picture of American wild life. At the time when it began to be published, 1860, less than fifteen years had passed since the country's boundary had been pushed from the Sabine, the Red, and the Arkansas rivers, and the Rocky Mountains, onward to the Pacific. In that decade and a half we had gained Texas, Oregon, New Mexico, and California, and had enlarged the national area to an extent equal to that of the entire territory east of the Mississippi. A real frontier in 1860 along the line of the Missouri and the Arkansas, with thousands of fighting Indians beyond that line, and some of them east of it, gave the reader an ardent concern in the adventures in *Malaeska*, *Seth Jones*, *Masasotit*, and other tales which told of life when the frontier was in New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. These tales had both contemporaneousness and vitality.

"As editor I sought the best work of the best writers in that particular field of fiction," said Mr. Victor a few years ago to the author of this article. "All was up to an excellent standard of literary merit. The detective and love story came later, when rank competition on the ten-cent trade made it seem necessary to introduce these elements. Almost without exception the original dime novels were good. Their moral was high. All were clean and instructive."

This judgment by the man who shaped these little books will be accepted by most persons who remember them in their best days. Ethically they were uplifting. The hard drinkers, and the grotesquely profane and picturesquely depraved persons who take leading rôles in many of the dime novels of recent times were inexorably shut out from their progenitors of Beadle's days.

These tales incited a love of reading among the youth of the country. Though

making no pretensions to be historical novels, they often dealt with historical personages. Many of the boys and girls who encountered Pontiac, Boone, the renegade Girty, Mad Anthony, Kenton, and Black Hawk in their pages were incited to find out something more about those characters and their times, and thus they were introduced to much of the nation's story and geography. Manliness and womanliness among the readers were cultivated by these little books, not by homilies, but by example. It can be truthfully said that the taste and tone of the life of the generation which grew up with these tales were improved by them.

No age limit was set up among Beadle's readers. Lincoln was one of them. So was Seward, and Henry Wilson of Massachusetts. Report of a later day had it that Toombs — who, however, as an officer of the Confederacy, was on the wrong side to find them accessible in their early days — was a devourer of these tales when he could get at them. "The man," said Zachariah Chandler, "who does not enjoy *Onomoo, the Huron*, has no right to live."

One at least of Beadle's tales registered itself in the politics of the time. *Maum Guinea*, Mrs. Victor's slavery tale, which issued at a critical moment in the Civil War, and which, republished in London (all Beadle's novels were republished in London until 1866), circulated by the tens of thousands in England, had a powerful influence in aid of the Union cause at a time when a large part of the people of that country favored the recognition of the independence of the Southern Confederacy. Mr. Victor's own "Address to the English People," issued at the same time, and in connection with the London edition of the novels, was widely distributed in England, and helped to overcome the sentiment which was clamoring for the breaking of the blockade and the purchase of Southern cotton for Lancashire's idle mills.

"My dear fellow," said Henry Ward

Beecher to Mr. Victor afterward, "your little book and Mrs. Victor's novel were a telling series of shots in the right spot." This is testimony which counts. Beecher was a special commissioner from Lincoln to England in 1863, to counteract the hostility to the Union cause in the Palmerston cabinet and among the aristocracy.

The very small claim which the black man ever had upon the dime novelists ended with Appomattox and emancipation; but the red man had a far longer and more prosperous career. While Red Cloud, Black Kettle, and their compatriots ravaged the frontier, the Indian tales had an easy ascendancy. The annihilation of Colonel Fetterman and one hundred of his troops near Fort Phil Kearney in 1866, and the slaughter of Custer and two hundred and fifty of his men on the Little Big Horn in 1876, sold forest and prairie stories by millions of copies. But that was near the end of the Indian's service for the fictionists. The campaign against Chief Joseph and the Nez Percés in 1877, and the rounding up of Geronimo and the Apaches in 1886, shut up the last of the descendants of King Philip and Pontiac on the reservations, and the novelists had to turn to other fields for material. Before Sitting Bull's ghost-dance irruption at Pine Ridge in 1890, the cowboy and detective tales had supplanted the Indian story in the popular favor.

For a few years the Santa Fé trader and the cowboy ran a flourishing career among the dime novelists. Soon after the Mexican war Capt. Mayne Reid, one of the heroes of that conflict, began his tales of the Southwest — *Rifle Rangers*, *Scalp Hunters*, *Captain of the Rifles*, and the rest of them, — some of which told of bloody deeds along the Santa Fé trail, and a few of which were reprinted among Beadle and Adams's "dimes" and "half-dimes." Like most of the early cowboy tales, these stories had Indians among their leading characters, intermixed with "Greasers."

The alien white ingredient in these tales injected an element of variety which the youthful reader appreciated. Reid had seen the Mexican at close range. He knew enough of the Mexican language to make his imprecations and objurcations — his “Sacre-e-s” and “Carambas” — sound real. This delighted the boy readers, and set the fashion in profanity which later writers in this field followed. Reid, J. E. Badger, Oll Coomes, P. S. Warne, and others, who told of the wild riders of the plains, red, yellow, and white, made every foot of ground between the Missouri and the Sierra Nevadas, and the Arkansas and the Rio Grande, familiar to dime novel readers.

More than a quarter of a century ago, however, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fé railway ended the days of the old trail and its story tellers. Between the railroads which transported the cattle from the ranges to the stockyards, and the barbed wire fences of the settlers who are abolishing the ranges, the cowboy as a picturesque feature of the Western landscape has passed out, and the dime novel will know him no more. This leaves the detective in possession of the stage.

In certain directions the detective tale has attractions for writers and readers beyond those offered by the average Indian story. The white “bad man” is more versatile in his badness than is his red or yellow counterpart. His field of activities is far wider. For the past half century the Indian’s operations have been shut in between the Missouri and the Sierra Nevada Mountains, but the white crook’s ravages have covered the whole landscape between the two oceans. Aiken’s *Black Hoods of the Shasta* made life exhilarating in the neighborhood of the Golden Gate, but in most of his most popular tales the action centred in New York. In Boston, St. Louis, Philadelphia, New Orleans, St. Paul, and other towns, the Vidocqs of Harold Payne, William H. Manning, Edward Willett, J. W. Osbon, and others cut their Gordian knots.

Calling the roll of the items in the vast output of Wheeler, Ingraham, Aiken, and their associates, it would seem that there could not be enough truth in the United States to last them. No complaint of this sort, however, was ever made by any of their constituents. In their pages the reader encountered life in all tints of shade and brightness. His imagination was kindled. He was incited to do things; and commonly the things which he wanted to do were heroic.

There were no problems in any of the dime novels, old or new, not even in *Maum Guinea*. Duganne’s *Massasoit* appeared before psychology was invented. If a paragraph or two of Arthur Dimmesdale’s soul torture had strayed into any of Beadle’s novels, the whole series would have been ruined. The things which were done in those little books were physical, and they were told in language that made pictures in the mind. There were no verbal puzzles in any of them, like those which James or Meredith impose. Long ago James said novelists ought to make their readers do a share of the work. Capt. Mark Wilton, Major S. S. Hall, Dr. Frank Powell, and their coworkers believed that their duty to their readers was to entertain them.

Between the writer and his constituents there was a bond of affection which incited him to make them glad to be alive. In the mind of every healthy boy there is romance. For that boy’s entertainment the producer of dime fiction strewed romance through farm, mining camp, and city street. Out of his surroundings, however sordid, the boy was lifted. He became, to himself, the centre of the universe. At the particular spot on the globe on which he stood all the parallels and the meridians converged. In no more intense a degree than this did exaltation ever come to the Count of Monte Cristo; — the world was his. What was Edmond Dantes’s paltry twenty million dollars to the vast treasures, physical and spiritual, spread out by Osbon before “Plucky Paul, the Boy Prospector,” and his tens

of thousands or hundreds of thousands of readers?

And the boy got all of this without any prefaces. The action began right in the first line. No little Peterkin ever needed to ask any Old Kaspar what this was all about. The battles with Indians and "Greasers," the capture of road agents and bank burglars, and the retribution which hit the villain who attempted to cheat the girl out of her patrimony, told their story in language so plain that the wayfaring man, though a fool, never made any mistake in grasping it.

From Beadle's days onward most of the dime tales have been American. Names, scenes, atmosphere, are familiar. In reading them the American boy's soul soared and sang. This is why the average youth who found *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe* dull was immensely entertained by Ellis's *Bill Biddon*, or Leon Lewis's *Daredeath Dick*, *King of the Cowboys*.

Were these things all illusions? Many of them were, yet they were pleasing illu-

sions. Illusions jolt us every day, which the dime novelists never touch, and which we would not want to read about. Some of us might like occasionally to see time's clock turned back to the days when the world was young enough and rich enough to have illusions that make us glad.

Was everything that the dime necromancers told us melodrama? Much of it unquestionably was. But an age which has seen a nation rise from Balboa's isthmus at the wave of a Prospero wand from Washington; which has recently looked on while a people in the Caribbean committed suicide; which is watching Nome's argonauts, up under the Pole Star, rival the glories of the Comstock under the reign of Mackay, Flood, and O'Brien; and which held its breath in November, 1906, while Roosevelt and Croker, like Castor and Pollux, rushed to rescue the nation from a New York editor who had built up an army in a night, has no right to object to melodrama in fiction.

SCHOOL REFORM IN BOSTON

BY DAVID SPENCER

A SIGNIFICANCE singularly marked and singularly broad attaches to the reconstitution of the Boston School Committee. The reform involved no technical problem of the schools, but concerned itself merely with the reconstruction of a faulty administrative system; it consisted, in fact, solely in the reduction of the school committee from a membership of twenty-four to a membership of five; yet so fundamental and so timely was this simple measure that its effect upon Boston school administration, great though that has been, is but a part of its scope. The reformers found themselves building better than they knew. They found that the principle of their reform was widely

applicable, that elsewhere it had already been applied, and, later, that its application would be urged in Boston to affairs outside the schools. In the light of their success, indeed, the reformers believe that the principle upon which they worked is now become of interest, not chiefly to the schoolmaster nor exclusively to the Bostonian, but to the thoughtful citizen in every municipality of the country.

The principle thus proclaimed so important is not new and is nothing cryptic; it is simply concentration of authority and responsibility for the sake of efficient administration. It is a common mandate of expediency, to be followed where abstract principles are not at issue; it coun-