

The Beadles and Their Novels

An enterprising printer named Erastus F. Beadle, who ran a shop in Buffalo, New York, issued a little paper-covered booklet of popular songs in 1856. He had picked up the words of the hits of the day, set them in type, and printed and bound them so cheaply that he could sell his little book for ten cents. This chance venture of Beadle's did so well that it gave the printer big ideas, and he decided to go to New York and devote himself to the publishing of dime books.

Born near Cooperstown, New York, on September 11, 1821, Erastus Beadle was thirty-seven years old when he made this move. He had hoed a hard row in boyhood and youth. He had to go to work on a farm when he should have been in school; later he found a job in a flour mill. One day he suggested to the miller the value of stamping his bags with the name of his product, and offered to cut some letters on wood and improvise a rude press for printing on cloth. The miller let him do this, in his spare time, of course, and was surprised and pleased at the result. Later he was surprised, but scarcely pleased, when his apprentice took to the road with his printing outfit and began marking bags for other millers.

In 1841 Erastus began working for Henry and Elihu Phinney, printers and publishers of Cooperstown. The Phinneys had discontinued their country newspaper and had gained some fame by operating traveling bookstores — forerunners of the modern bookmobiles — which they fitted out both in horse-drawn wagons and in canal-boats. For many years they conducted a chain of bookstores in Utica, Buffalo, Detroit, and other large towns. They taught Erastus Beadle not only diligence in the art of printing, but enterprise in the distribution of cheaply-produced literature.

By the time he was thirty, Beadle was ready to start out for himself. He went to Buffalo and set up a modest shop in this flourishing city of nearly 40,000, and did general printing and stereotyping. In 1852 he started his first periodical — a children's magazine called *The Youth's Casket*, edited by Mrs. H. E. G. Arey, a writer of verse and tales. The *Casket* must have been moderately successful, since four years later Beadle and Mrs. Arey added another magazine to their output, called *The Home*. This latter was devoted "to a much neglected form of education — that of the heart," and contained contributions from Alice and Phoebe Cary, Metta V. Fuller, William T. Coggeshall, and others.

When Beadle went to New York in 1858, he took this magazine with him, changing the name

to *Beadle's Home Monthly* and making Miss Fuller (now Mrs. Victor) editor; but the dime books soon took all of his attention, and the magazine was sold to S. H. Platt, who merged it in his *Household Magazine*. After a few years, Beadle took another flier in the periodical field with an ambitious competitor of the sensationally successful *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, but this later and more pretentious *Beadle's Monthly* lasted only eighteen months. Still later there were three story papers under the Beadle imprint.

Several able assistants had joined Erastus Beadle in his New York adventure. There was his brother, Irwin P. Beadle, who in Buffalo had displayed some talents as a publisher and a considerable taste for strong drink. There was Robert Adams, a young businessman with some money to invest. Also there were the Victors — Orville J. and Metta Victoria. Orville was a young journalist of thirty, who had been graduated from a theological seminary but who had decided to serve the larger congregation of the journalist. A frequent contributor to leading magazines, Orville married Metta V. Fuller, the "Singing Sibyl" of the Beadle group. He became a staff contributor to the Beadle magazines, and almost automatically a member of the company.

They found offices down on William Street, and went to work under the firm name of Irwin P.

Beadle & Company — which would seem to indicate that brother Irwin was the leading stockholder. They began with a *Dime Song Book* and a *Dime School Melodist*. There were a lot of these songsters, now all very rare. One series sold for one cent a copy. Perhaps the most interesting was the *Dime Union Song Book* of 1861, which contained the war songs of the North. There were also joke books, dialogues, speakers, etiquette books, letter-writers, cookbooks, and so on. There was a whole set of booklets by Metta Victoria Fuller Victor called "Beadle's Dime Family Series," designed for housekeepers.

In 1859 there appeared the first of a long series called *Beadle's Dime Base-Ball Player*. These booklets were illustrated by woodcuts and contained the proceedings of the "annual baseball convention," instructions for playing, and the "averages" and records of players and teams. In 1860 "Beadle's Dime Biographical Library" was begun under Orville J. Victor's editorship; it had lives of Daniel Boone, Tecumseh, and so on. A later series of similar nature furnished biographies of such heroes as Washington, Lincoln, Grant, Davy Crockett, Israel Putnam, Ethan Allen, and John Paul Jones. All these little books were bound in paper; they were not really "yellow-backs" — the color was a kind of orange or saffron.

But we are interested in these little dime man-

uals only as they are forerunners of the fiction books. The first of "Beadle's Dime Novels," as the original series was called, was issued in 1860. To initiate the new series, the publishers chose a story which had just appeared as a prize serial in *The Ladies' Companion*, Mrs. Ann S. Stephens' *Malaeska*. Mrs. Stephens was a magazinist of established reputation, and this story was in her best style of melodrama, inflated description, and noble emotion. The editor (it was probably Orville Victor) wrote in his introduction, that this story had been chosen for Number One of the "Dime Novels" for "The chaste character of its delineations, the interest which attaches to its fine pictures of border life and Indian adventure, and the real romance of its incidents." And he added this patriotic and moral note: "It is American in all its features, pure in its tone, elevating in its sentiments."

Malaeska was subtitled: *The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*. The heroine is an Indian princess, but in the denouement her son drowns himself when he learns that he is a half-breed. The Indians in this story, unlike those in most of the later dime novels, were Noble Savages in the tradition of Chateaubriand's *Atala*. In some respects, however, *Malaeska* set the pattern for the dime novels of the sixties and seventies: its setting was the American frontier, it brought in Indian

characters, it is melodramatic in plot, and it is "pure in tone and elevating in its sentiments."

The little book sold well, and Beadle issued a dozen more of the series in 1860. Two of the dime novels of that first year became, in the course of time, the best best sellers of all the thousands of such stories; these were *Malaeska* and Edward S. Ellis' *Seth Jones*. Both were repeatedly reissued, and each is supposed to have sold in the neighborhood of half a million copies.

Ellis was only twenty years old when he wrote *Seth Jones*; later he wrote about 150 other tales, as well as a considerable amount of serious history and biography, and received an honorary degree from Princeton. *Seth Jones* was less ladylike than *Malaeska*, being chock-full of adventure. This was what was needed to complete the pattern set by Mrs. Stephens' novel; most of the succeeding Beadles were crammed with exciting fights, thrilling pursuits, and hair-breadth escapes from all kinds of extraordinary predicaments. Young Ellis seems to have tried to get everything he could think of into his first novelette — a love affair, the humor of backwoods characters, miraculous woodcraft, repeated narrow escapes, all kinds of pursuits (by footrace, by boat, on horseback), a contest with a rattlesnake which "charms" its victim by its baleful eye, and two heroes, each of whom has the athletic prowess of Paul Bunyan, the skills

of Leatherstocking, and the cleverness of Davy Crockett.

One factor in the success of the early Beadle novels was the demand for them among the soldiers of the Union armies. They had just made a good start at the beginning of the Civil War, and in 1861 they poured from the Beadle presses in a heavy stream — little novels of fast action, melodrama, and homespun humor about border life, Indians, the Revolution, and Mexico. Beadle's Dime Novels performed somewhat the same function during the Civil War that the "Armed Services Editions" did for G.I.'s during World War II. The little saffron-covered books, measuring four by six and a half inches, and usually running a little over a hundred pages, their front covers adorned by a woodcut picture of a character or scene, were shipped to the boys in the field in bales and carloads, by trains, in wagons, in steamboats. When bundles of them arrived in camp, the men almost mobbed the sutler who distributed them. They were passed from hand to hand and read and reread.

In 1862 Irwin P. Beadle's share in the business was bought by Erastus F. Beadle and Robert Adams. Irwin's habits had made him undependable, but a few years later he went into the dime novel business in competition with his former partners, and published "Irwin's American Novels" in

1865-1867. Erastus and his remaining partner meanwhile had been going great guns under the name of Beadle & Company, publishing over four million dime novels by 1865, including about ninety titles for the regular series and some twenty-five for the American News Company.

Robert Adams died shortly after the war, and in the early seventies his two younger brothers, William and David, were taken into the firm, which then adopted the name, Beadle & Adams. A new series was begun in 1865 called "Beadle's New Dime Novels." Five of the books given by T. Henry Foster to the State Historical Society of Iowa belong to this series. Two numbers of the "New Dime Novels" were published each month for a time; later they were issued weekly. The distinction of this series was the cover picture, which was printed from a woodcut and hand-colored by the use of stencils.

A year or two later still another series, called "Beadle's Pocket Novels," very similar in format, was begun; its covers were colored by both tint-blocks and stencils. According to the publisher's announcement, the effect rivaled that of "the popular chromo," but the books were still "sold at the standard price — ten cents!" Four of the Foster gift books are "Pocket Novels"; indeed, Number One of the series was Oll Coomes' *Hawkeye Harry*.

"Beadle & Adams' 20-Cent Novels," which contained twice as many pages as the dime books, were published from 1871 to 1876, but were apparently less successful. When they gave them up, the publishers started a new series which, instead of raising the price, lowered it. "Beadle's Half-Dime Library," which continued for more than twenty-five years and comprised over a thousand titles, was one of the greatest successes of cheap printing and distribution in American publishing history. How many millions of these 24-page quarto novelettes, with slashing woodcuts on their first pages, were eagerly purchased and breathlessly read by how many millions of boys and men (yes, and girls, too) nobody can estimate with anything approaching accuracy. One of the earliest of this series, Number 13, is included in the Foster gift.

And so the Beadles went on multiplying series, trying new dodges in publishing and distribution, and adding new authors, until the mere bibliography of their issues becomes almost a jungle. To add to the confusion, other publishers got into this profitable game. Besides brother Irwin, there were two other competitors in the sixties — Elliott, Thomes & Talbot, of Boston, with the "10-Cent Novelettes," and R. M. DeWitt & Company, of New York, with "DeWitt's 10-Cent Romances."

There were more competitors in the seventies; but it was in the early eighties, when Norman L. Munro came in with his "Old Cap Collier" series, and his brother and rival George P. Munro entered the field with "Old Sleuth," that competition became really spectacular. George Munro had been a bookkeeper for Beadle & Adams; he later joined Irwin P. Beadle, but eventually set up for himself, not only as a leader in dime-novel production, but as an active publisher of magazines and cheap books. But the Munros, finding the market glutted and popular taste satiated with westerns, turned to the city streets and to stories of gangsterism, crime, and detection. Under this influence, the Beadles, too, tended to withdraw from the Wild West and to substitute the Bowery and the Battery for Dead Man's Gulch and the Lone Star State as settings for their thrillers. It was a part of the nation-wide swing to the city: urban dominance had affected not only industry, politics, society, and education, but the dime novels as well.

In 1886 David Adams died; and three years later Erastus F. Beadle, now sixty-eight and a millionaire, retired, turning the business of the house over to William Adams. Beadle had built a home called "Glimmerview" on Otsego Lake at Cooperstown. In 1892 he was an unsuccessful candidate for Congress, and in 1894 he died.

Orville J. Victor remained chief editor of the Beadle & Adams paper-backs until 1897, when he retired. The next year Beadle & Adams was sold to M. J. Ivers & Company, which continued the use of the Beadle name for some years, chiefly reprinting the most successful of the earlier Beadle novels.

It used to be the fashion to excoriate dime novels as idle and mischievous reading full of danger to the boyish imaginations which were excited by them in the seclusion of haymows and attics. It is now the fashion to praise them in a kind of nostalgic rapture over those golden days when pulses would still leap in sympathy with Dare-Devil Dan, the Prairie Ranger, as he escaped the scalping knife by a clever trick or a thrilling ride. The present writer believes dime novel literature represents an important incident in the history of popular reading in America. The following facts must be noted by anyone who sets about evaluating it.

First, the dime novels were definitely moral. Not only did they avoid any hints of sexual misbehavior, but they left sex pretty much alone. Girls were kidnapped, to be sure, so they could be rescued; but nothing "improper" took place on any Beadle page. Sentiments were elevated in tone, and nobility generally triumphed. This was especially true of the early Beadles.

Second, the stories did perform the educational

job of teaching some history painlessly. Probably part of that history was inaccurate; surely it was uncritical. Perhaps the inaccuracies were no greater than those to be found in full-length historical romances, though the history was certainly sketchier.

Third, the characters were generally "types." Though this is a great fault, from a literary point of view, it is not so for the youthful and naive reader, who has no wish for subtleties which get in the way of forthright and understandable action.

Fourth, the narrative is admirable. Despite language which today seems stiff, despite clichés and overdrawn descriptions of melodrama, these stories rush (as their writers would say) like a mountain torrent. The best of the dime novelists knew how to tell a story with proper conflict, suspense, heightened emotion, culmination. They were masters of the action plot.

Fifth, the plots are more or less stereotyped. In this respect, and in others, there is a certain kinship between dime novels and folk literature. There is a great variation in plots, of course; but in the Beadle novels of the 1870's, which are represented by the Foster gift, it would be possible to set up a few master plots of which all the hundreds of stories would be variants. For the avengement plot R. M. Bird has the archetype in *Nick of the*

Woods — the Indian fighter revenging himself for the massacre of his family. Another is based on the separation of the hero or heroine from his or her family, with a later reunion after multiple adventure. "Recognition" in the denouement is a common device. Take the advice of a seasoned reader of dime novels, and never believe anyone is dead until the last page; any drowned character, especially, is likely to turn up at last safe and sound in the arms of hero or heroine.

Sixth, the style is generally inferior. Clichés are of the essence: Indians "bite the dust" right and left — too often the gal with the "raven tresses" is "but a poor, bruised reed" — but the men — "Ah, it is our intrepid hero, Hawkeye Harry!" And when our author sits down to a paragraph of nature description, it is generally overdone.

Seventh, these stories are packed with material — incidents, stuff about the life of the place and the times, characters, action, action, action! If you will take the trouble to look over any group of best sellers throughout the whole history of American publishing, you will come to the conclusion that the great mass of readers like books that are filled chock-full. The leisurely, sparse, rarefied books are not for the masses. The people like their books crammed — with something! In this respect *Anthony Adverse*, for example, is good

dime fiction: it is a full book. But it is too bulky; Mr. Allen could have made about a hundred dime novels of it — "Beadle's Anthony Library."

Finally, dime novels are, of course, escapist literature. That was really what their critics had against them. Critics want us to face up to everyday life. But we won't do it. We know better than the critics what we need; we know we need, for the sake of our sanity, to escape once in a while and quit facing up. Boys need escape, too. They need to play hooky from life, and their teachers, and their parents, and go on a wild ride with Thunderbolt Tom, the Wolf-Herder of the Rockies.

So we are grateful to our liberators from reality, these dime novelists. Who were they? Captain Mayne Reid, the British adventurer and author, was one to whom the Beadles once paid no less than seven hundred dollars for a single story; usually, however, the publishers paid \$75 to \$100 for a 40,000-word tale. Another adventurer distinguished in the Beadle list was Colonel Prentiss Ingraham, who fought in at least half a dozen wars before devoting his energy to writing, turning out over six hundred novelettes. E. Z. C. Judson, who wrote under the name of "Ned Buntline," was another adventurer — midshipman, duellist, chief of scouts with the Indians during the Civil War, and so on. Judson is said to have given

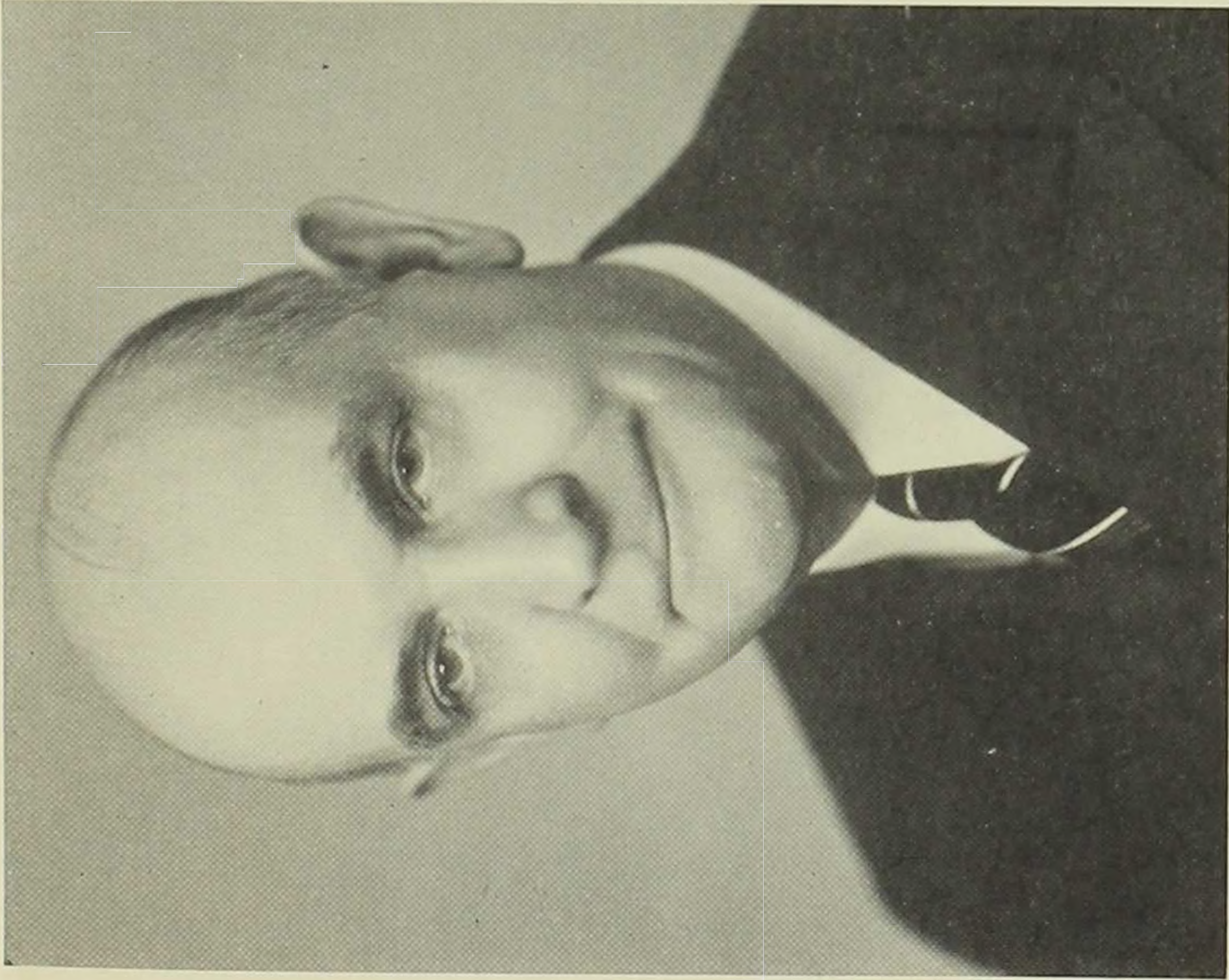
William F. Cody the nickname "Buffalo Bill." He wrote some four hundred dime novels, edited a magazine called *Ned Buntline's Own*, lectured on total abstinence, wrote a number of plays, and died at sixty-six after what might be called a full life. "Buffalo Bill," himself an Iowan, signed eight novels for the Beadles, but they are generally supposed to have been written by Ingraham or Judson.

Another of Beadle's authors who wore a military title was Major S. S. Hall, remembered for *Big-Foot Wallace, the King of the Lariat; Wild Wolf, the Waco; Double Dan, the Dastard*; and many other alliterative heroes. A real frontiersman was Joseph E. Badger, Jr., author of the "Silver Blade" stories and more than a hundred others. Edward L. Wheeler, an Easterner, created the character of "Deadwood Dick," and also wrote of such famous sleuths as "High Hat Harry, the Baseball Detective," and "Sierra Sam, the Frontier Ferret." Albert W. Aiken, another Easterner, did successful westerns without much first-hand knowledge. He is said to have averaged a dime novel a week for years. Almost as prolific over a longer period was Thomas C. Harbaugh, who began writing at eighteen, turned out hundreds of thrillers, and died in the poorhouse at seventy-four.

Oliver "Oll" Coomes, author of eight of the ten

books in the Foster gift, was an Iowan. Born in Ohio in 1845, Coomes was a boy of eleven when his parents settled in Jasper County. He attended Iowa College at Grinnell for one year. When he was twenty-five, Coomes began farming in Cass County. He was named first postmaster at Wiota in 1872, served on the school board, and represented Cass County for two terms in the General Assembly. During half a century he wrote almost one hundred such thrillers as *Vagabond Joe*, *Delaware Dick*, *Minkskin Mike*, *Webfoot Mose*, *Blundering Basil*, and *Tiger Tom*, the *Texas Terror*, all under the pen name Oll Coomes. He refused to be lured from the farm, meanwhile selling most of his dime novels at from \$50 to \$100, although *Reckless Rollo* brought him \$500 and *Omaha, Prince of the Prairie*, the fabulous sum of \$1,000. At the time of his death in a car accident near Storm Lake in 1921, Coomes was financially well off. The prince of Iowa dime novelists was buried in the Wiota cemetery.

Historians of American literature and publishing have failed to note that the great era of publication of classics in cheap form (1875-1893) was motivated and instigated by the success of the dime novels. If thrillers could be published for ten or twenty cents in paper covers, why not Emerson and Macaulay and Dickens? Beadle & Adams were among the early entrepreneurs in



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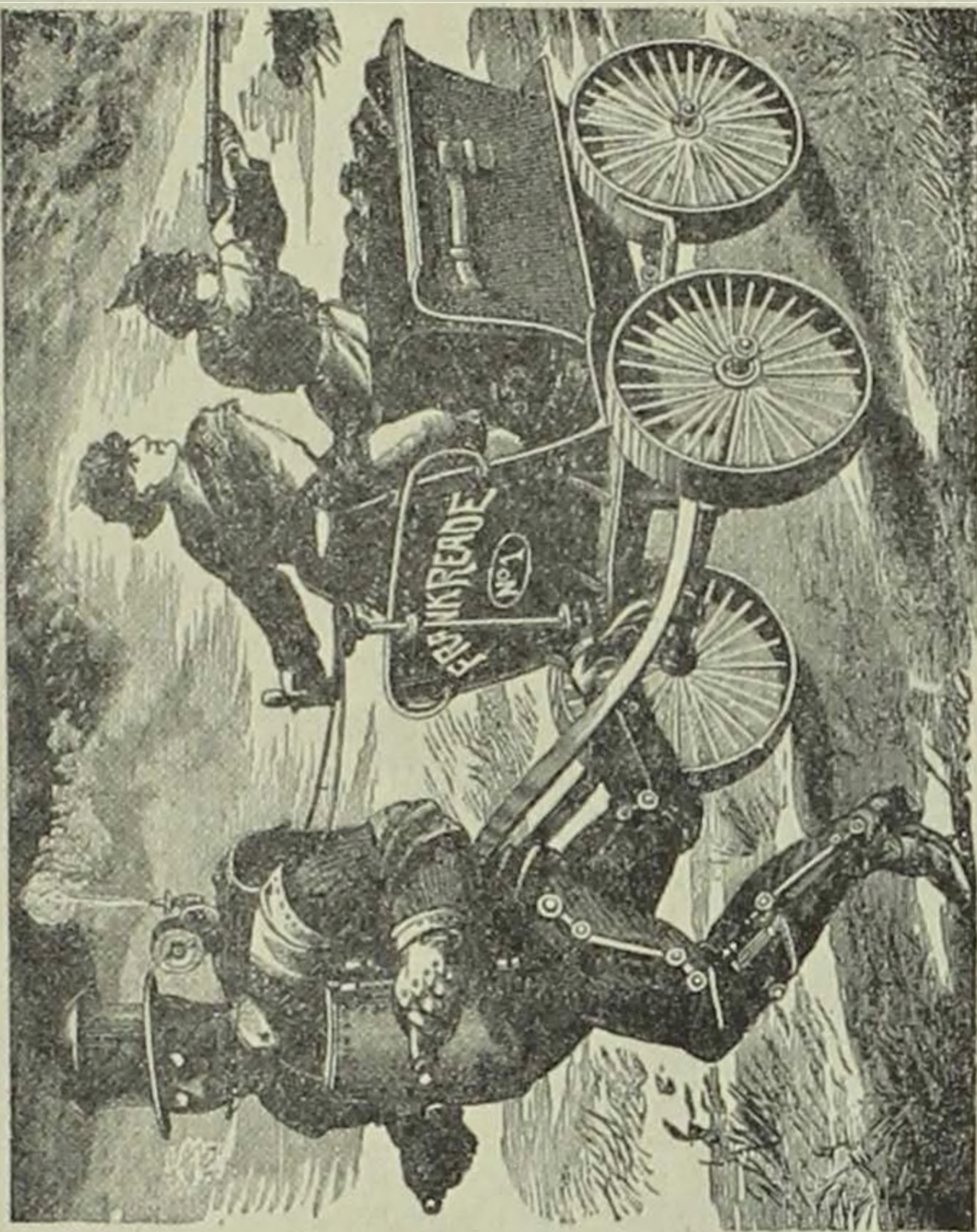
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this field, with their "Fireside Library." By 1877 at least fourteen firms were issuing "libraries" of this kind; it was in that year that George Munro began his "Seaside Library," which, when it hit its stride, issued a new book in quarto every day. Not all of them were classics, by any means; but it was a wonderful exhibition of mass publication for the people. With various changes, this movement continued until, in the hard times of the early nineties, the cheap publishers went broke.

Dime novels continued to be printed and sold, however, along with the cheap classics in paper covers, by such publishers as Street & Smith, until the First World War. A little later they were superseded by the "Pocket Books"; and cheaply-priced books, begun by the trickle of Erastus and Irwin Beadle's dime songsters, are now a flood which there is no stopping.

FRANK LUTHER MOTT