

# THE LITERARY DIGEST

March 17, 1900

Vol. XX., No. 11

## RISE AND FALL OF THE DIME NOVEL.

**I**N the opening chapters of "Tommy and Grizel." Mr. Barrie gives a delectable description of a writer of "penny-dreadfuls." There will probably always be a demand for "the great Pym" and his sort; but it is doubtful if ever again he can flourish in this country as in the decade from 1860 to 1870. Writing in *The Bookman* (March), Mr. Firmin Dredd describes the genesis, development, and (as a distinct class) extinction of the "dime novel," which has really played a conspicuous part in the literary history of the country. It was taken seriously enough at the time by multitudes of imitative boys and by their irate parents to justify serious consideration now by the critics.

The dime novel, we are told by Mr. Dredd, dates from the year 1860. Shortly before, the firm of Beadle & Adams began a series of cheap publications for the lower middle classes—books on etiquette, letter-writing, etc., which informed the gentle reader that he or she should not say "I is" or "he read them papers," if wishful to rank among the choice and elegant spirits of society. Then in the spring of 1860, Mr. Orville J. Victor conceived the idea of the dime novel. The Beadle series was begun, and one of the most popular American writers of the day, Mrs. Ann S. Stephens, contributed the first story, "Malveska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter." Soon a staff of writers gathered, who "combined a knowledge of the popular taste, dexterity in the working out of conventional plots, and an industry that was simply amazing." Among them was Mr. Edward S. Ellis, afterward one of the most popular of juvenile writers. Despite the extravagant plot and crude treatment of these early tales, Mr. Dredd thinks that they were wholesome, and some of them certainly attained to an extraordinary circulation. We quote again:

"Probably none of the writers of these books was more successful in commanding a wide circle of readers than Mrs. M. V. Victor. The fourth of the stories which she contributed to this series attained a sale which makes most of the records of book sales of the present day appear insignificant in comparison. This was 'Uncle Ezekiel,' the story of an alleged typical Yankee and his exploits at home and abroad. In the United States the book within a short time reached a total sale of 270,000. In England the sales reached 211,000, a total of 481,000. This, however, was surpassed by 'The Backwoods Bride,' of which 550,000 were sold, and 'Maum Guinea.' The last named was a story of negro life, which, appearing at the time of the war, actually rivaled in popularity Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'

"The success of this series in a few years brought many rivals into the field. George Munro, who had been a bookkeeper in the employ of Beadle & Adams, began publishing himself books along the same line about 1865. A few years later the staid orange covers of the original dime novels were replaced by covers of gaudily colored design. The typical dime novel of 1870 . . . is very interesting as showing the crudity of the colored prints of the time. [OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com) the early seventies was only a step in the whole scheme of evolution. With the great competition came a marked decline in the quality of the material. Each year showed advances in outright sensationalism, until the culmination was reached in the typical shocker of recent memory."

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)