

MUST THE NICKEL NOVEL DIE OUT? IT IS IN DANGER NOW

NOT every age produces a Shakespeare, a Dante, a Kipling, or a man destined to have his name written high in large thirty-two candle power incandescents. Every so often comes an apparent literary famine, and when that comes, the literary world and large canoe breastpins and little beard-moles arise at Friday Afternoon Literary Clubs to express wonderment about what the country's coming to anyhow. Why is it, they inquire, that we're not producing any more real mahstahs of literachuk?

There's going to be equal consternation one of these days in an entirely different circle when it is learned that we're going to stand vis a vis with a famine in another brand of literature. I refer to the five and ten cent literature known as "nickel libraries" and "dime novels." Unless there appear new men of inventive genius to give birth to an "Old Sleuth" or a "Nick Carter" adventure each week, then the people who read that sort of fiction must get their taste educated down, or up, to something else—either that, or do without.

The present supply of men who can turn out a 50,000-word thriller a week isn't going to last always. As it is there are less than fifteen men in the country who can be depended on for this type of marrow-chilling reading matter. Some of the star performers among these are men advanced in years. One or two are already in poor health. They cannot stand the nervous strain of their stupendous weekly tasks many years more. It is inevitable that they must retire from the field and permit younger men to think up exploits for "Nick Carter," "Old Sleuth," and the rest of the "world-famous detectives," as the heroes are invariably referred to in the chronicles. And if there be no new recruits equal to the task—what then? Ah, then will come the critical period when we must look elsewhere for our thrills. News stand reading matter will become as innocuous, as temperate as a none-genuine without-the-signature brew supposed to be advertised. Villains we meet in literature will have little to fear beyond a fire of smart epigrams hurled by forgotten women, or by heroes who wear Van Dyke beards.

By that time, too, Al Woods and Theodore Dreiser may have caused melodrama for problem plays or society dramas, and duels, gun play, and the like will take place behind the scenes, if at all. More than likely the hero will merely lean against a grand piano and tell the villain that he may "live to regret them words," after which he'll saunter off the stage with a smile as even fingering a revolver. Those of us who like a little action as we go along will be in a pretty fix indeed.

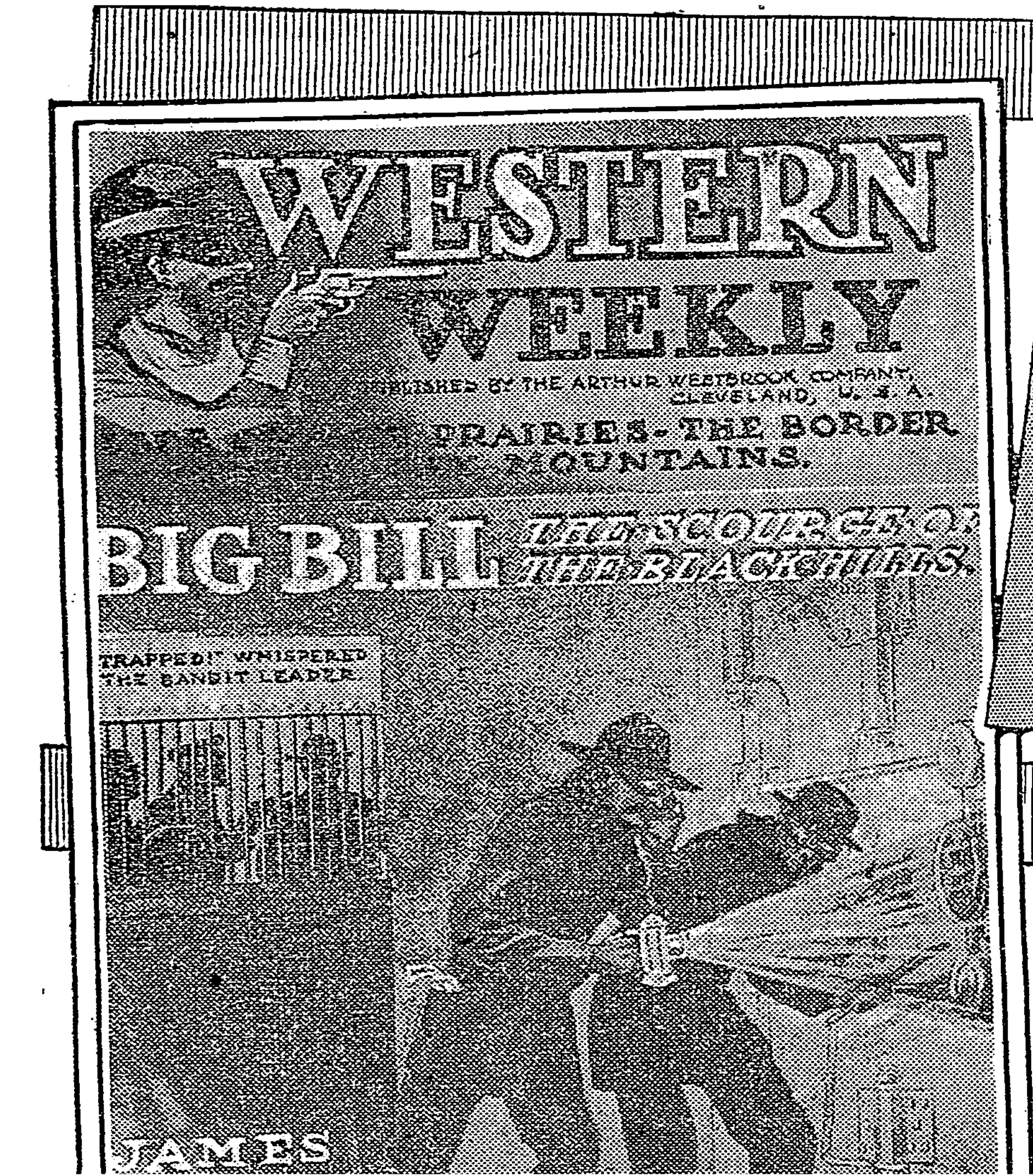
Don't get the impression either that the only people cast into gloom when the day arrives that five-cent "libraries" are no more will be the A. D. T. messenger boys and boys who read thrilling adventure behind their geographies during school hours supposed to be devoted to study. As a matter of fact, if I may rely on the word of one of the leading publishers, less than 25 per cent. of the readers of five-cent thrillers are boys.

The idea of the messenger boy as the ultimate consumer has long been fostered by the pack-and-judge funnyists, but the news stand dealers will tell you that the bulk of their "adventure" sales are to grown men—brakemen, plumbers' as-

years. Two or three times in recent years he has been obliged to take a rest cure. And no wonder! The Nick Carter stories run about 30,000 words apiece, and Dey has been writing one a week year in and year out! Furthermore, he has been known to write three stories in a single week to provide a precautionary supply ahead, that the followers of the career of Nick Carter may not seek their weekly adventure in vain if the creator should fall ill or go on a vacation.

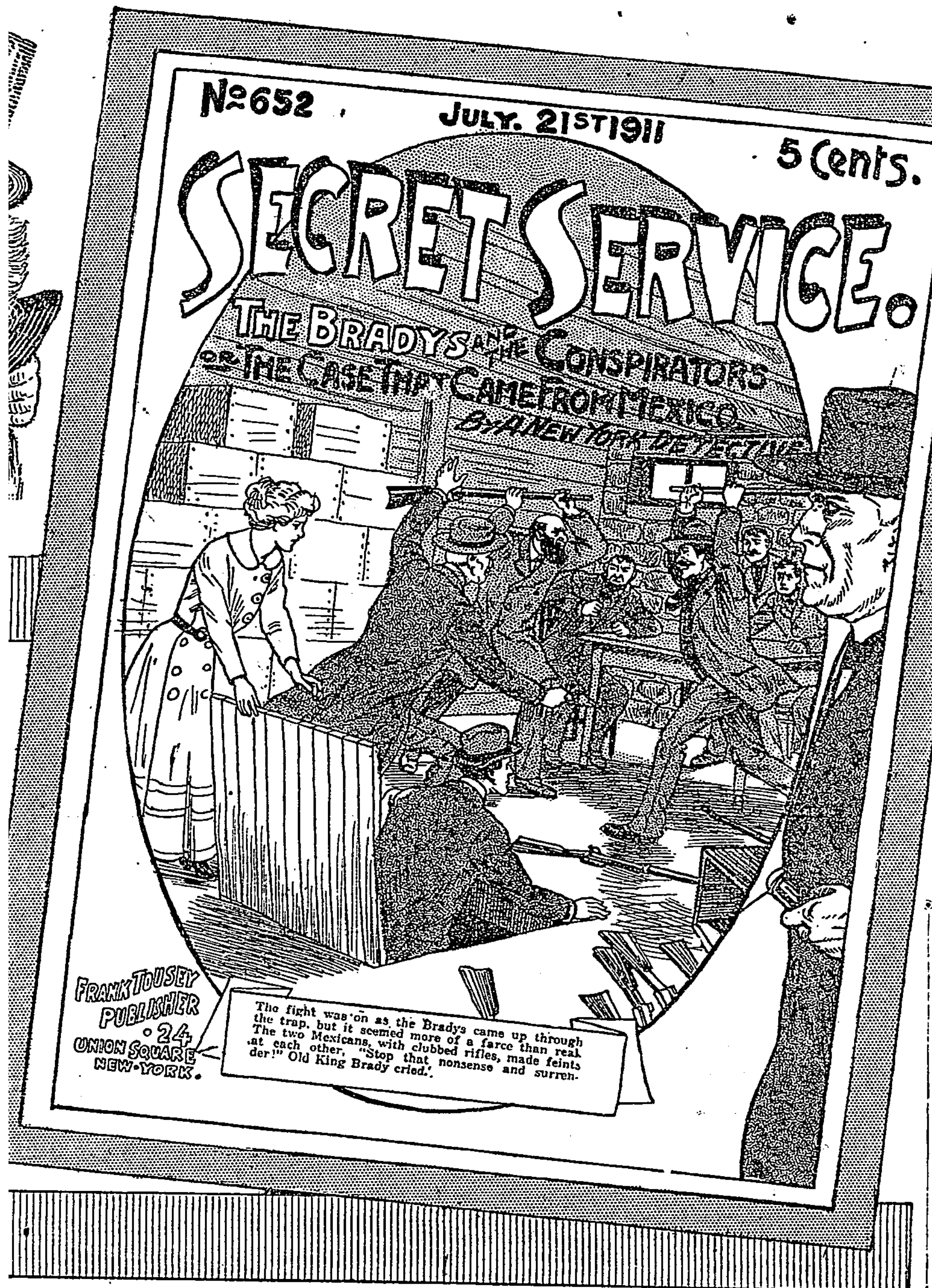
This means that Dey can turn out, if need be, 15,000 words a day of thrilling adventure, or an equivalent of about fifteen newspaper columns. When one pauses to think that for a newspaper reporter, working twelve or fourteen hours a day, as many reporters are obliged to do, 2,500 words is considered a good day's work—in fact, above the average—and that Winston Churchill considers a 50,000-word novel a year, all that a novelist should be expected to do well, and that more things happen in a Nick Carter story than in the average novel—when you consider all these things, it should be apparent to all that the creator of Nick Carter is not a person to fritter away his time.

Dey was born near Watkins Glen, N. Y., went to Cornell, and was admitted to the bar in New Hampshire. He also became a Colonel on the staff of the Governor of New Hampshire. Then he worked into the newspaper business and got to be known as an expert in the invention of Sunday "feature" stories.



It Calls for Ability to Write One, Though You Might Not Think It, and The Supply of Authors Is Decreasing--Less Than Fifteen of Them Left to Supply the Demand.

"Old Sleuth."



by "Old Sleuth," composer of "Nick Carter," who defies death weekly in the pursuit of desperate evildoers for a rival publishing house.

The original "Old Sleuth" was Harlan Page Halsey, who prior to his death, a few years ago, was, by Mayor Low's appointment, a member of the Brooklyn Board of Education. At the time of a crusade against the yellowback novel, Halsey once defended his work thus:

"There is not a single word in any story that I have written that could be objected to by the most rigid moralist. All my stories have had a good moral precept to teach, and I will venture to say, out of the mass of matter that I have turned out, a thick volume of 'moral sensation' could be extracted. The trouble lies in the fact that a few bad writers have come into the ranks of cheap literature and because of their misleading work a blanket judgment is thrown over us all. The objections are always made by those who have not read the works but who get their ideas from the comic papers."

Two "Old Sleuths" have tracked erring humans since Halsey's death. The man who has been "Old Sleuth" most of the time since then also writes boys' books for a conservative Eastern publishing house. They are the sort of books that Sunday school teachers give out as prizes to those earnest young pupils who know the golden text thirty consecutive Sundays. And the conservative Eastern publisher would be considerably astonished if he knew that the mild-looking man who does these books for him has a dual personality to the extent of writing the "Old Sleuth" stories.

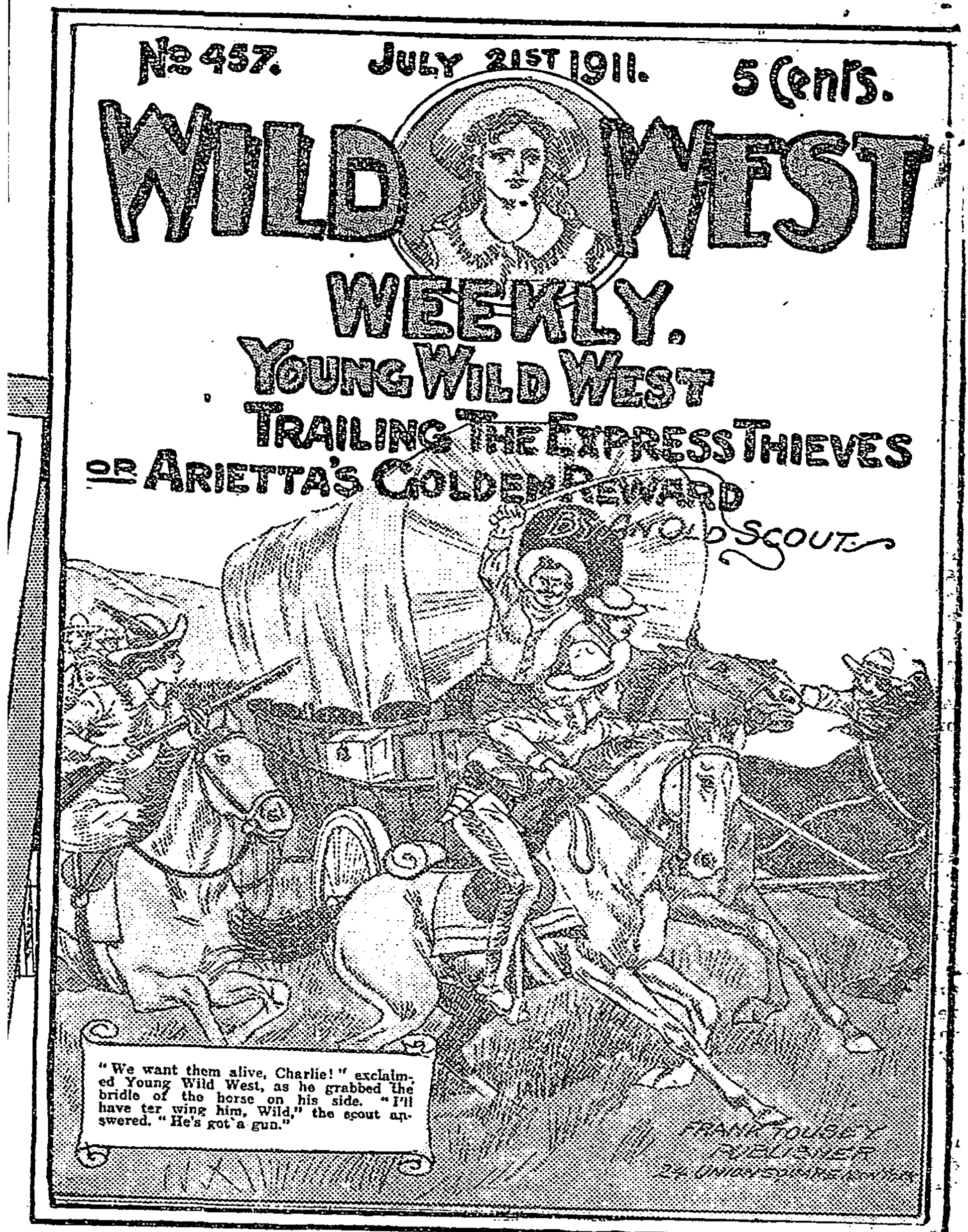
Another leading writer of narrow-gauging literature is J. E. Hopkins of New York, formerly on one of the Hearst pa-

pers. Hopkins got into his present line through an odd impulse. He was working as one of the editors of a paper down in Memphis, Tenn., at the time Edward W. Carmack, editor of The Nashville Tennessean, was shot and killed in the midst of a political feud. It was a ticklish time to be editor of a paper in Tennessee. An editor who took sides in the feud too strongly ran the risk of having some radical member of the opposit faction come in and muss up the office with editorial life blood. So Hopkins reasoned it out like this:

"Why engage in such risky and sanguinary occupation as newspaper work? Henceforth I shall do all my adventuring on paper. I'll retire to a comfortable flat and write of billings and intrigues, but that is as near to actual excitement as I shall venture in future."

He resigned his place on the paper that day before the impulse should leave him, went to New York, and has been writing what the publishers call their "Adventure Series" ever since. These run 50,000 words each and Hopkins has been producing them weekly. He is said to work almost constantly for about four days until his weekly task is completed, and then has the rest of the week on his hands with nothing to do but eat, play, and make up his sleep.

Hopkins's works are more pretentious looking than the "Old Sleuth" or "Nick Carter" Series. They come in regular book size and sell for 15 cents. Many of his stories are based on personal experience. One is founded on facts about Chinese tongs that he learned when Tom Lee, a respected Chinese leader in New York, was suing a newspaper publisher for libel. Hopkins did some scouting



about among the Chinese for the publisher and heard many weird facts about a Chinese villain who made a business of a killing folk for anybody that wanted a given person out of the way and was willing to pay for the service. This villain—now serving a life sentence in the penitentiary at Charlestown, Mass.—is the central figure of one of Hopkins's stories.

Another author of the blood-and-thunder school is George Rathbone, who passes on all manuscripts for one of the two leading publishers of this class of literature, and also writes Indian adventures. Rathbone is 66 years old but knows exactly what sort of adventure will please a reader of only one-fourth his years.

Certain well-defined rules govern the writing of nickel thrillers. In the first place, every story must point a moral. The detective must overtake the villain in the end and the latter must face speedy retribution. Then each chapter must start with a thrill and end with a thrill. For example, an ordinary novel writer might start off with the statement that:

"It was May, and an unvaried pall of fleecy cloud muffled the whole expanse of sky from zenith to horizon. Petals of sweet-scented apple blossoms fell like snowflakes along the winding roadway that led from village out to the home of the kind-faced old curate."

But the producer of five-cent thrillers must begin his chapter something like this:

"My God!" she cried, as she arose from her couch and stared at the window with a look of horror. "There is that face again. It is he. Oh, will no one save me!"

The same chapter might end in this fashion:

"And who are you?" demanded the real murderer, staring back in amazement.

"I am known as Old Sleuth, the detective," replied our hero, in a calm, even tone, speaking in Italian. "And the man sank back with a gasp of despair."

The chapters must be short, too, in order to keep up a constant procession of sensations throughout the narrative. Most of the writers of the thriller school have their typewriting machines supplied with a little device such as telegraph operators use, which records the exact number of words. Then whenever the writer finds that he has written 100 words or more of a chapter he knows that it is time to speed

up for the final spurt, like an autoist about to take a grade.

This word indicator also serves to notify the writer when the story itself must be brought to a close. The manuscripts must not vary more than 200 or 300 words. If the publishers arrange for the same number of pages each week. Hence, when the writer finds himself within a thousand words or so of his limit, as indicated by the little dial, he wots well that it is high time to round up every outlying villain, not already brought to justice and work up to the culminating thrill of the whole adventure.

As an additional mechanical aid, some nickel novel writers keep a card index of thrills. Let us suppose the writer thinks of using the appearance of a bandit from behind a boulder as the closing sensation of Chapter XII. He looks at his card index and finds that the bandit-from-behind-rock thrill was used in a story he wrote only six weeks previous. So he runs through the cards and finds a thrill that he has noted down, but which has never been used. The discovery of a dying man in the roadway with the missing papers in his inside coat pocket. He considers also another thrill or two that he hasn't used for more than a year, and finally selects the one that seems to dovetail most neatly into his immediate needs.

The most difficult thing the writers say, is the selection of a title—the sort of a title that will make people stop at the newsstands with a keen desire to know further particulars. Not infrequently the title will be the last thing supplied to the story.

In order to produce 20,000 or 30,000 words a week the author cannot take time for revision of manuscript. Yet the original typewritten manuscript of a blood and thunder narrative, just as the writer ground it out, page by page, is usually a good copy as a printer could desire. Probably not more than one word in the page has been changed.

And for all the demonstration of guile and physical endurance necessary to produce from 2,000 to 3,000 words of excitement a week the writer receives from \$125 to \$150 for each story. That is all.

But, regardless of the monetary knowledge they face a family. Only a genius could turn out so much reading matter week after week, and the supply of this kind of genius appears to be on a rapid decrease. Nothing short of a miracle can provide nickel thrillers for our children and for our children's children.

assistants, and others, who like something light and diverting after a hard day's work, men who would find George McCutcheon or Harold McGrath a bore, and would declare John Henry more clever than O. Henry.

Furthermore, there are real "high-brows" numbered among the consumers of the literature of thrilling killings. The late Senator Hoar used to be an omnivorous reader of the yellow-backs. He would read them by the hour, and then send a Senate page out after a second helping. Another man who confessed to finding enjoyment in this line of reading is George B. McClellan, former Mayor of New York City. Then there is a high official of the Standard Oil Company and a highly respected Kentucky Judge—oh, and lots of others who can talk Atlantic Monthly English, and yet who like thrills of the elemental sort. You may have a quiet, sleek looking next door neighbor, with white chin whiskers, who has the "libraries" mailed to him each week in a plain wrapper, and sits up reading them while others sleep.

Nearly all the producers of the nickel thriller literature are former newspaper men—men who have "done police" and stored away enough adventures from real life that have come under their observation to last them for years and years and years.

One of the most ingenious as well as the most diligent of the inventors of hair-raising plots is Frederic Marmaduke Van Rensselaer Dey—the same being his sure enough name—who has been concocting the Nick Carter weeklies for a great many

In his quest for material Dey reads all the police news in the New York papers, pastes many clippings in his "suggestion book," runs through all the new detective stories as rapidly as they come from the press, and knows Gaboriau by heart. Then he has a way of engaging people in conversation and "shaking them down" for good stories without them knowing it. Many of these stories are framed up and worked into "Nick Carter."

It is said that there are one or two episodes in Dey's own life that he has utilized for blood-chilling material. Some years ago, it is said, Dey, who was in Colorado Springs, incurred the displeasure of a man who had an irascible temperament and toted a gun. The story is that Dey dodged behind a hotel pillar after shots had been exchanged between the two, but not in time to save himself a wound in the thigh.

When he writes, Dey uses a typewriter, but in recent years he has dropped into the habit of dictating his stuff to a relay of stenographers. He'll dictate to one while another is transcribing. Nick Carter has been rounding up male-factors for about twenty-five years. Not quite all of this long series, however, has been produced by Dey himself. A few of the stories have been done by occasional contributors, and a great many of the earlier exploits were the inventions of John D. Coryell, who lives near New York City.

Coryell, however, has another claim to a three-sheet poster in the hall of fame.