

1. IN SEARCH OF THE DIME NOVELS

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JESSE JAMES FRANK JAMES

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New York, October 4, 1885. ISSUED EVERY FRIDAY.

THE JAMES BOYS IN ARKANSAS
OR
AFTER CONFEDERATE GOLD
BY D. W. STEVENS

"Well, old comrade, what is it?" Jesse James finally asked. "My two friends are waiting for me." "Let 'em wait. I want ter tell yer about a million of dollars in gold that lies buried down in old Arkansas which I want yer ter help me ter get."

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THE JAMES BOYS IN PERIL:
OR,
Carl Greene the Detective's Oath.
By D. W. STEVENS.

Siroe was on the edge of the tall bluff, and for a single moment hesitated. "On, Siroe! Liberty or death!" roared Jesse James. Siroe gathered himself up for a mighty spring, rushed to the edge of the precipice, and bounded over far out into the air.

Esotericism and Popular Culture

- Popular culture emerged, since the late 18th century, as an important vehicle for disseminating ideas. Jeffrey Kripal's *Mutants & Mystics* (2011) showed how comics and TV series popularized esoteric themes and movements





A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others? Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

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Has life brought you that personal satisfaction, the sense of achievement and happiness that you desire? If not, it is your duty to yourself to learn about this rational method of applying natural laws for the mastery of life. To the thoughtful person it is obvious that everyone cannot be entrusted with an intimate knowledge of the mysteries of life, for everyone is not capable of properly using it. But if you are one of those possessed of a true desire to forge ahead and wish to make use of the subtle influences of life, the Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) will send you *A Sealed Book* of explanation without obligation. This *Sealed Book* tells how you, in the privacy of your own home, without interference with your personal affairs or manner of living, may receive these secret teachings. Not weird or strange practices, but a rational application of the basic laws of life. Use the coupon, and obtain your complimentary copy.

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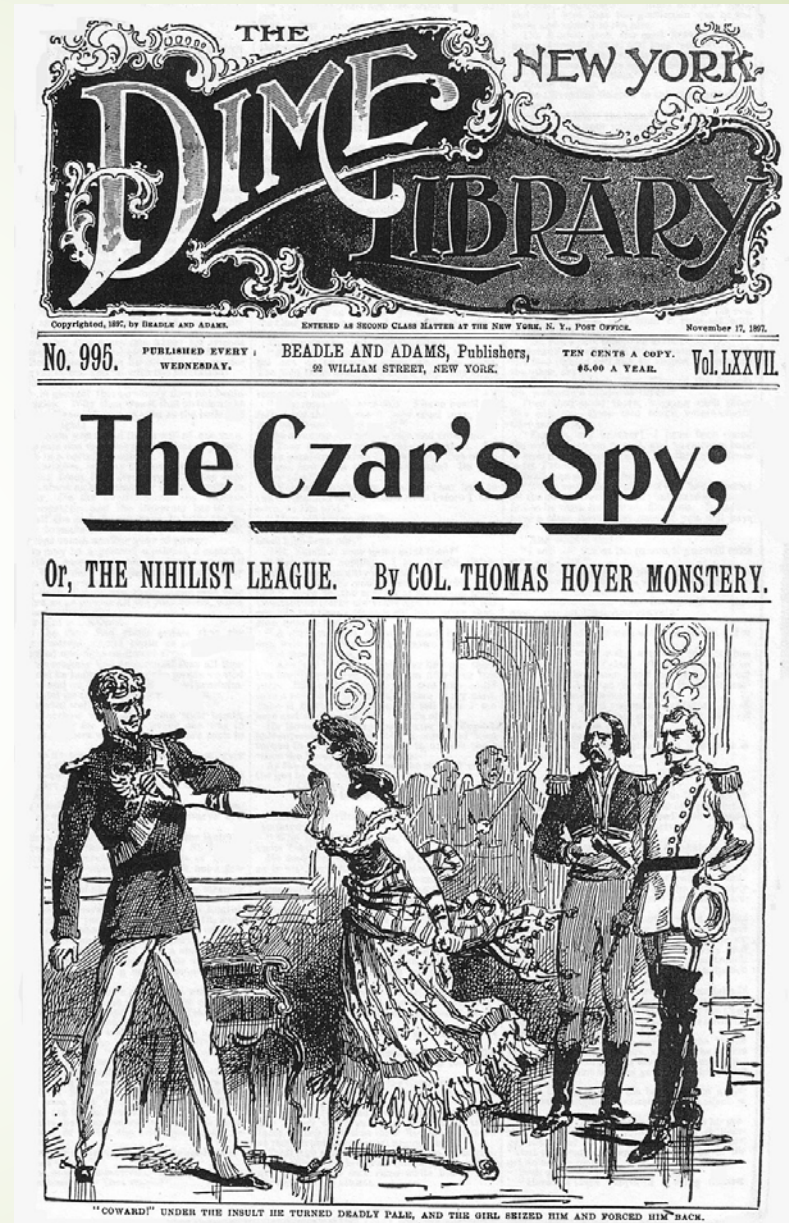
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Fiction and/or Reality

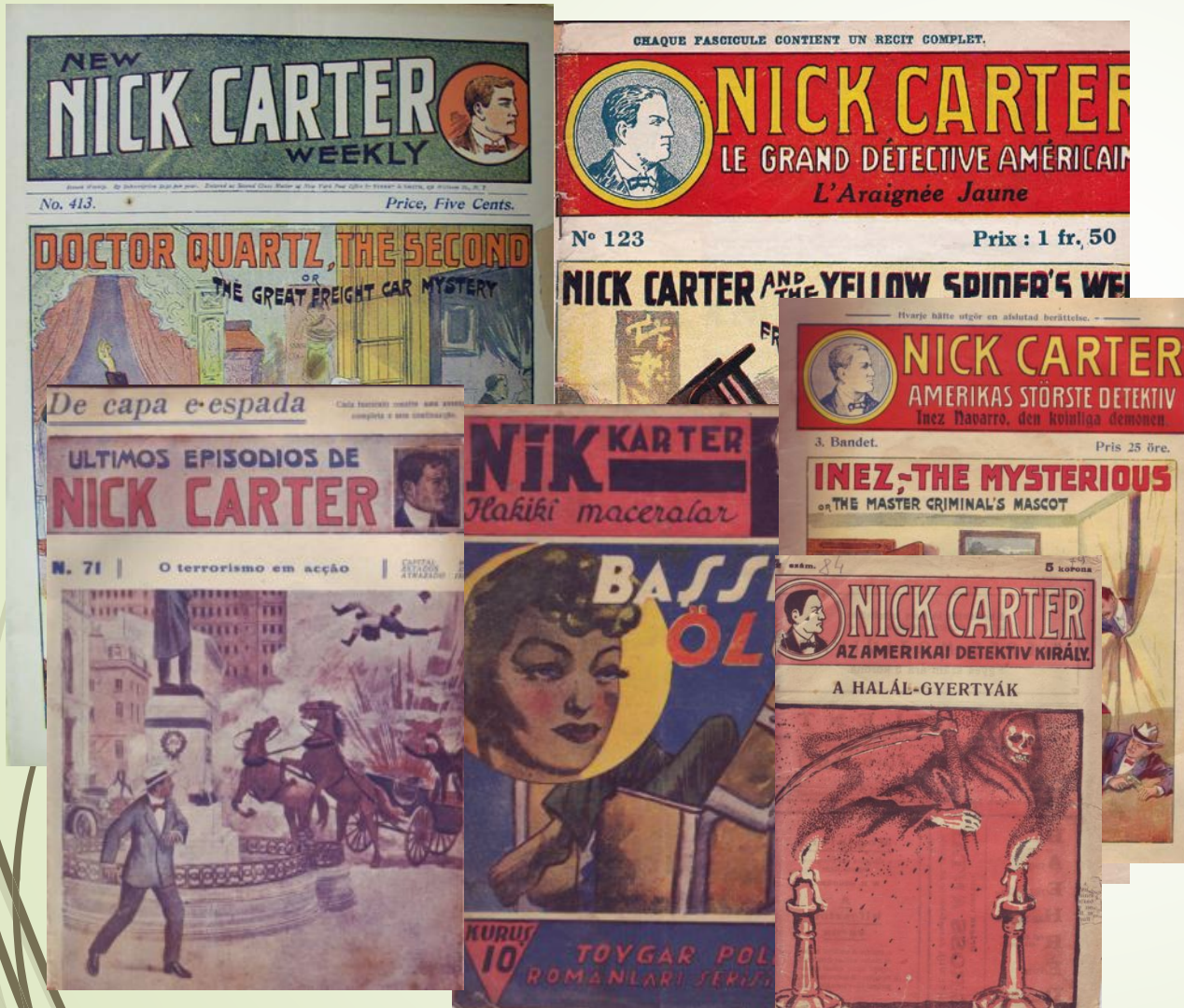
- Kripal noticed how modern esoteric organizations became well aware of the role of popular culture, and started placing advertisements in American comics and pulp magazines (here, *Amazing Stories*)

Dime Novels

- Before comics, however, there were the dime novels. The first were simply novels written as a whole and then cut in chapters sold as weekly instalments. Later, the dime novel adopted the slogan «each instalment a complete story» and, although the main characters remained the same, each 16 or 32 page booklet included a stand-alone illustrated story



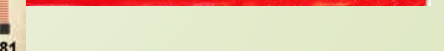
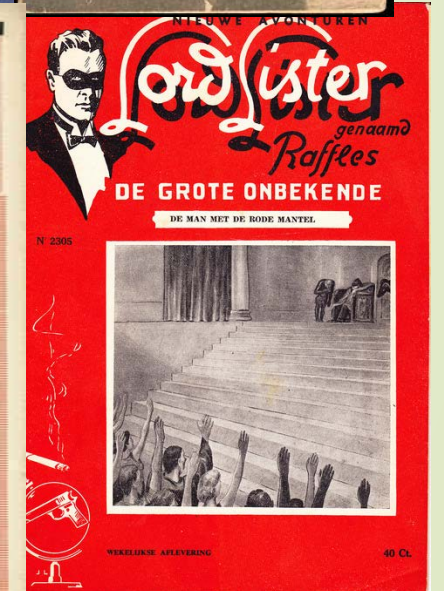
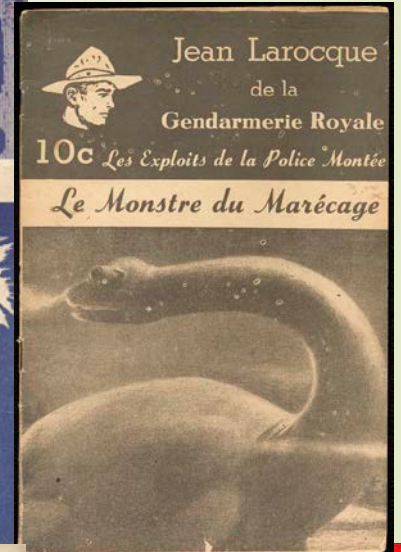
A Globalized Phenomenon



- The modern dime novel was created by U.S. publishers Beadle & Adams and Street & Smith. The latter, established in New York in 1855, went on to create a worldwide market through its joint venture with the German company Eichler, which had branches in several countries. The best sold dime novels, featuring the New York detective Nick Carter, reached in 1914, a worldwide weekly readership of 75 million

A Slow Decline

- ▶ After World War I, the dime novel was slowly replaced in the U.S. by pulps (magazines with more than one story) and comics. In Europe, Eichler went bankrupted and its owner committed suicide
- ▶ Dead in the U.S., the dime novel continued in Quebec and in Europe throughout the early 1950s, and survived in the Netherlands with one popular character, the gentleman thief Lord Lister, until the 1970s



2. NICK CARTER VS. MADAME BLAVATSKY



Frederic Van Rensselaer Dey (1861-1922)



- Dey was not the first, but the main author of the Nick Carter stories. His suicide in 1922 marked the end of the golden era of the dime novels. In 1904, Dey created one of the most intriguing characters of the whole Nick Carter saga, Irma Plavatsky

Who Was Irma Plavatsky?

- ▶ While kind and benevolent when she was her normal self, Irma Plavatsky was possessed for long periods by the evil Tibetan magician Dazaar and performed the most evil deeds, which she only vaguely remembered after each episode of possession ended



Plavatsky or Blavatsky?

- ▶ The name of Irma Plavatsky obviously evoked Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891), and the New York tabloids had often published lurid exposes of the Theosophical Society



The representative of the Theosophical Society pursuing a fiend.

THOSE DESTITUTE ARABS.

WHAT THE MEMBER OF THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY WHO ACCOMPANIED THEM HOME IS REQUIRED TO ACCOMPLISH.

Some time since nine Arabs arrived at this port from Trinidad, from which place they were sent entirely destitute by the local authorities. Shortly after four more Arabs arrived. On arriving here they were without means and in danger of starving, and the local authorities considered that they were not bound to take care of them. Owing, however, to the kindness of Mayor Wickham they were admitted to Bellevue Hospital, and Colonel Henry S. Olcott exerted himself to raise the means to send them back to their country. There was some difficulty about this, however, for the captains of vessels sailing for Gibraltar feared that they might rise in mutiny. To reassure the captain who finally agreed to take them, Colonel Olcott persuaded a member of the Theosophical Society, Mr. E. S. Spaulding, to accompany the Arabs to Gibraltar, from whence they were to be shipped to Tunis. There is some mystery about these Arabs that it is difficult to dispel. They can give no account of how they first came to the West Indies. They say that all they can remember is that they found themselves in an open boat, and that they were nine days out before they reached Demerara, from whence they were sent to Trinidad.

The following letter, written to Mr. Spaulding by Colonel Henry S. Olcott, will be found of interest in this connection:

New York, August 2, 1876.

MY DEAR SIR: The duties which, as a fellow of the Theosophical Society, you are expected to perform during your present journey are as follows:

After restoring the unfortunate Arabs under your care to their families and presenting the letter of His Honor the Mayor to the American Consul at Tunis your service to the public will have terminated. You will then devote your time to two objects:

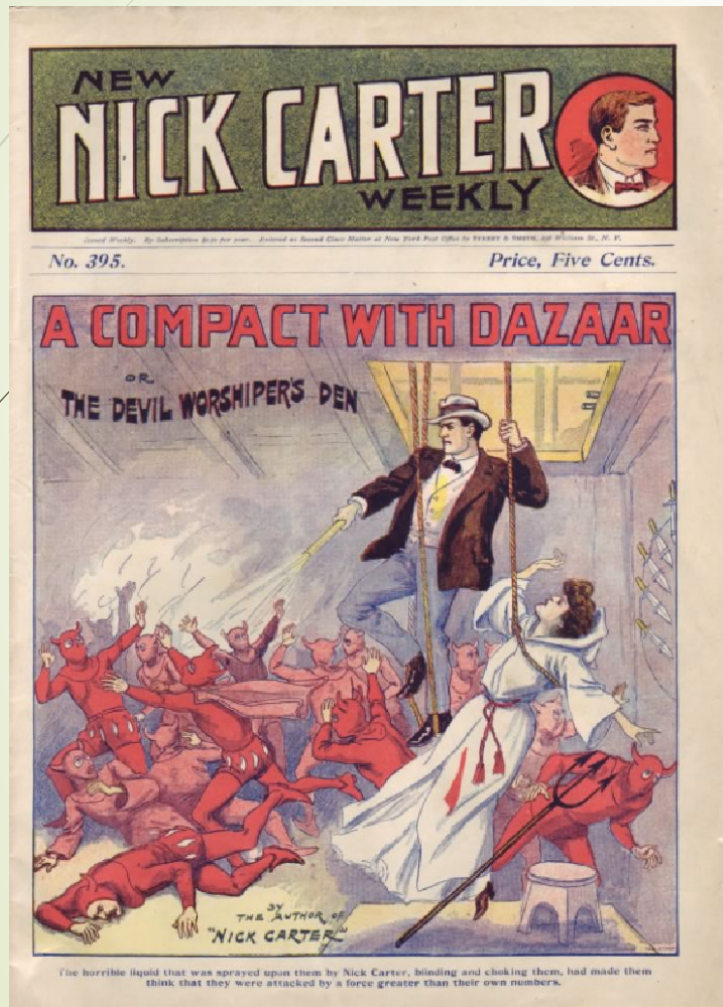
1. To seeing every possible phase of magical and necromantic phenomena and taking notes of their minutest details, so as to be able to report the facts to the society.

«Lamaism»



- In the early 20th century, many Orientalists regarded Tibetan Buddhism as an inferior form of Buddhism or an entirely different religion, «Lamaism», dominated by superstition and black magic

Expelled from the Great White Lodge



- ▶ Dazaar was a century-old Tibetan «Master» who created a powerful organization, controlling inter alia all «Satanic lodges» in the world
- ▶ He was one of the members of the Great White Lodge – another Theosophical concept –, and they always incarnated in male bodies. Dazaar selected a female body, thus violating White Lodge rules and being sanctioned with expulsion

A Master in Love

- Incarnating in a young woman creates in the otherwise omnipotent Tibetan Master a crucial weakness, the potential for human love. As Irma Plavatsky, Dazaar falls in love with Nick Carter. In the end, she has the opportunity of killing the detective, but prefers to shot herself



Gender and Race Issues



- ▶ Madame Blavatsky was a Russian woman who claimed to be guided by superhuman Oriental masters. The Dazaar stories also implied that there was something sinister in a spiritual organization led by a white woman controlled by Oriental magicians



Masters and Women

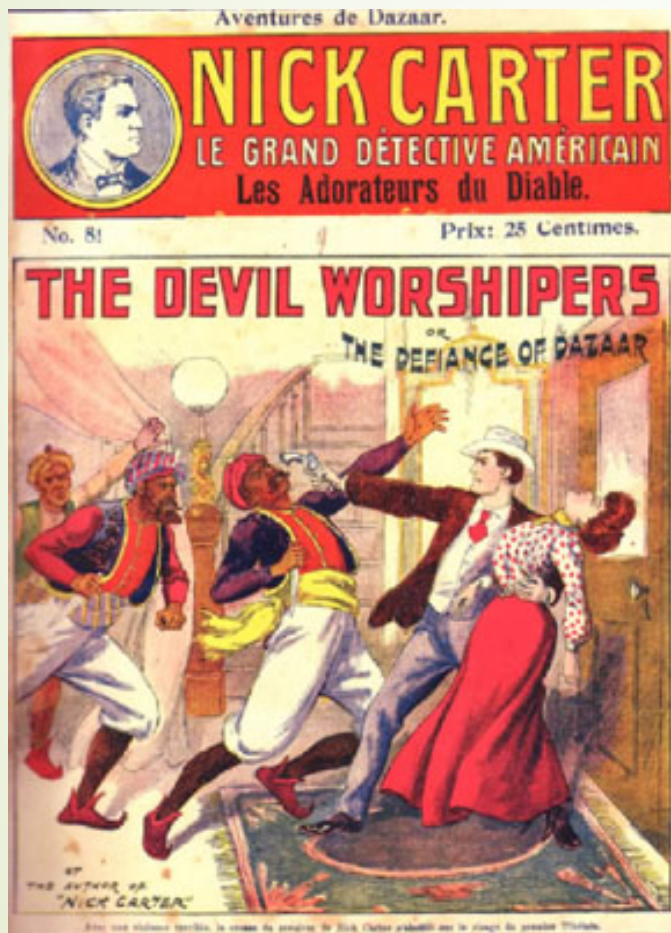
- As a man, the Tibetan Lamaist-Theosophist Dazaar was perhaps a match for the highly moral Victorian hero Nick Carter. When the Master borrowed a female body, neither Theosophy nor Tibetan Buddhism could seriously compete with Christianity and Victorian ethos, and Irma Plavatsky was fatally doomed



Petithuguenin's Version

- ▶ In France, the Eichler group had Dey's Dazaar cycle not only translated, but somewhat rewritten, by Jean Petithuguenin (1878-1939), an author with some interests in Paris' esoteric subculture

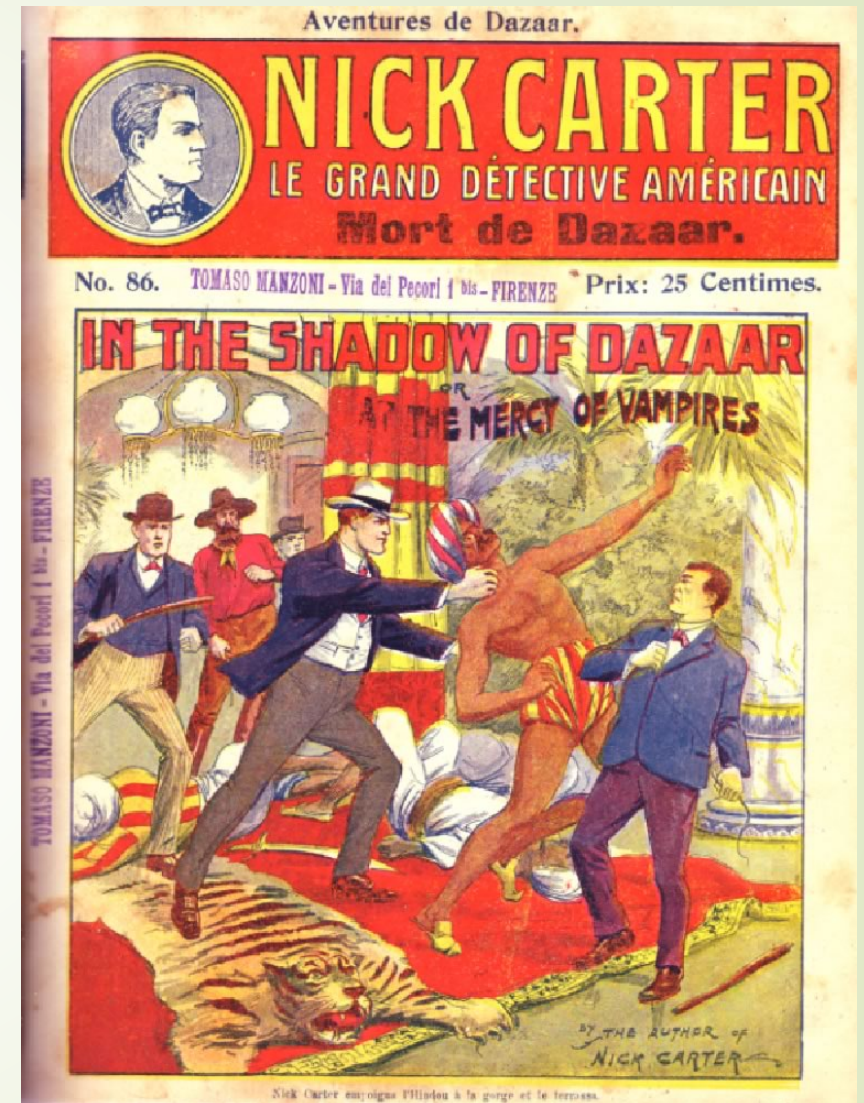
«Tibetan Negroes»



- Influenced by Catholic missionary literature against «Lamaism», but also by intra-esoteric criticism of Theosophical orientalism, Petithuguenin depicted an even bleaker picture of Plavatsky and the Tibetans, going so far as to call them «Tibetan negroes»

A Different Plavatsky

- In the French version, Dazaar borrows from the grave the body of Irma Plavatsky, the deceased fiancée of Nick Carter
- In the version by Petithuguenin, Plavatsky does not shot herself, but is magically «called back», or dissolved, by the Great White Lodge she betrayed. Her last words are also different: «All is lost... All has been in vain... I failed to solve the ultimate enigma»



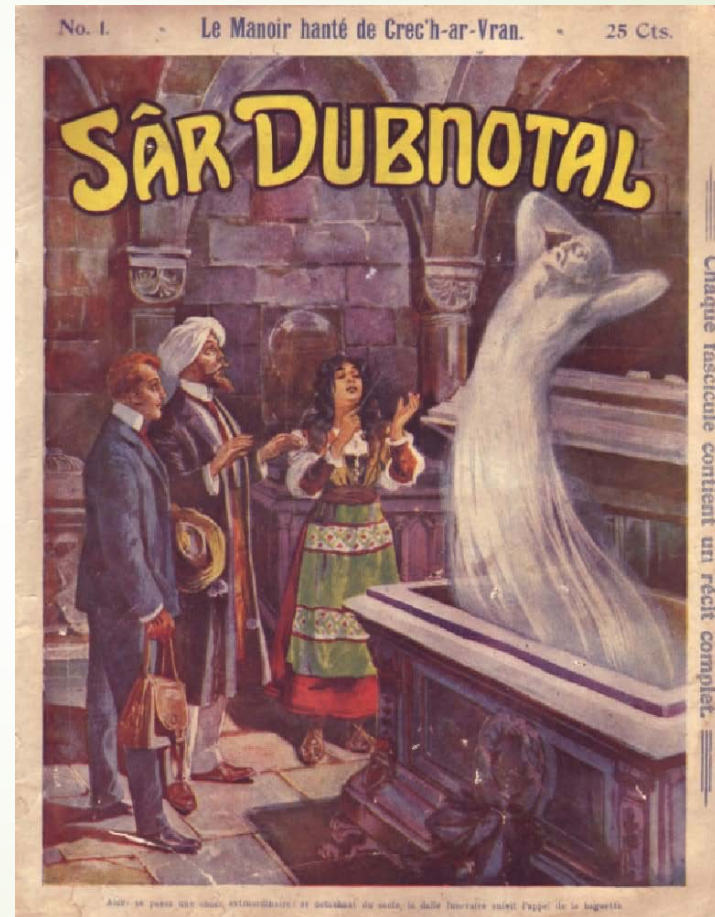
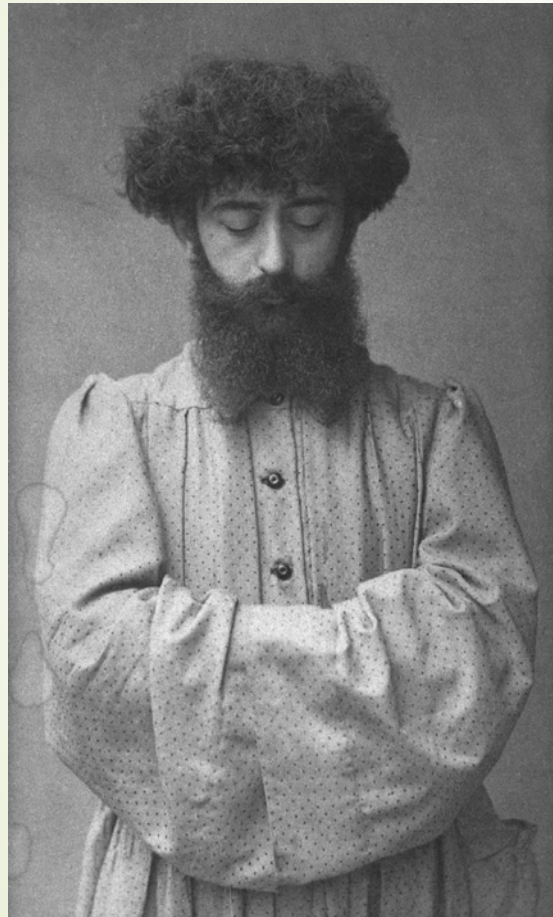


The Ultimate Enigma

- In the jargon of the anti-Theosophical Rosicrucianism of Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918) the «ultimate enigma» indicated the «eternal woman» and the mystery of love. It was precisely this enigma that Eastern religions and cultures were regarded as unable to solve, because of their allegedly «inferior» moral code

Jean Delville (1867-1953), *Mysteriosa* (1892).
Delville was an associate of Péladan, but later became a Theosophist

3. FROM SÂR PÉLADAN TO SÂR DUBNOTAL



Sâr Péladan

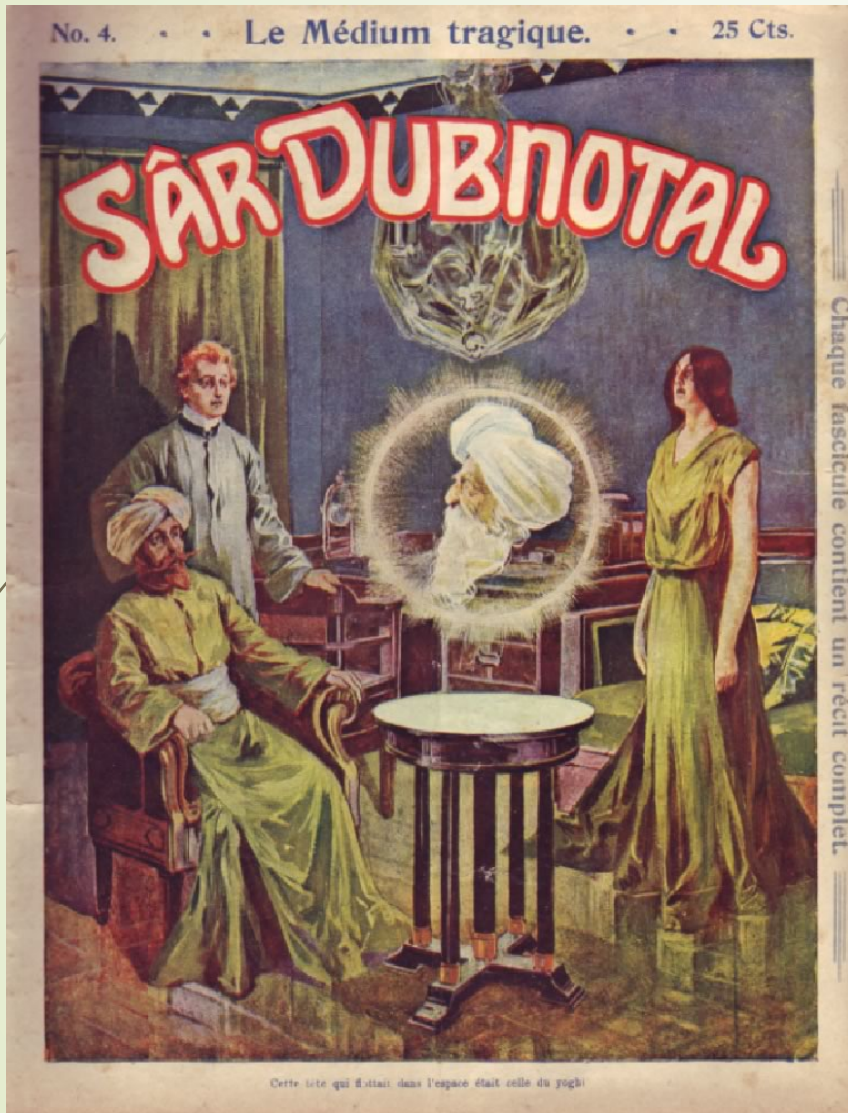


- ▶ The anticlerical Kabbalistic Order of the Rosy Cross and the Christian (if unorthodox) Catholic Order of the Rosy Cross, of the Temple and the Grail were both established in Paris in the 1880s. The fight between the two groups amused the tabloids and was nicknamed «the War of the Two Roses»
- ▶ Crucial to the amusement were the antics of «Sâr» Péladan (left, portrait by Jean Delville), the leader of the Christian group, who was often seen in Paris dressed in the most eccentric garbs

Charlatan and/or Genius?

- ▶ Péladan claimed to have inherited the title «Sâr», «magician-king», from remote Babylonian ancestors. Easily dismissed as a charlatan, in fact his «Salons de la Rose-Croix» created a significant international network of artists with esoteric interests. His very notoriety made Rosicrucianism well-known among a general public that would otherwise have ignored it



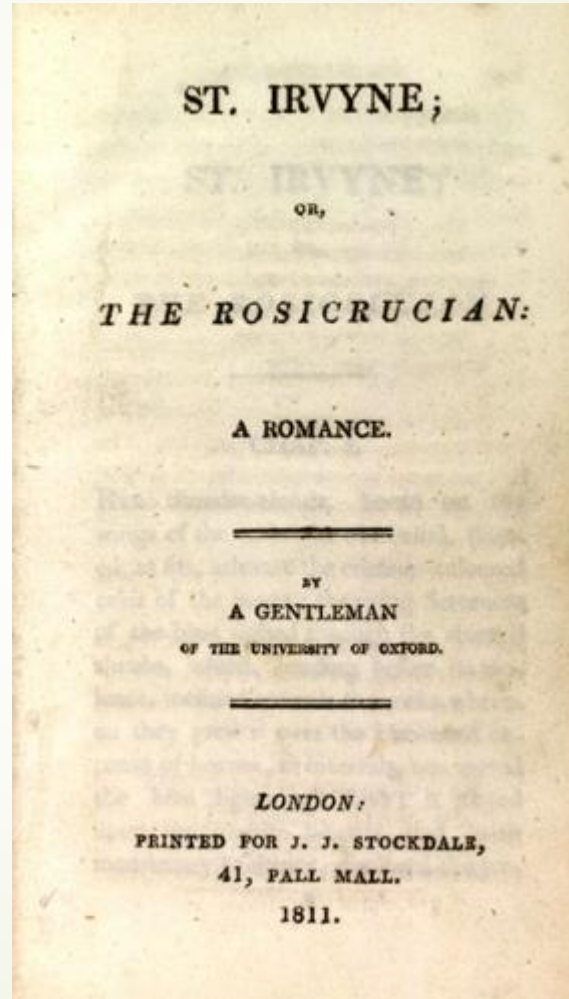


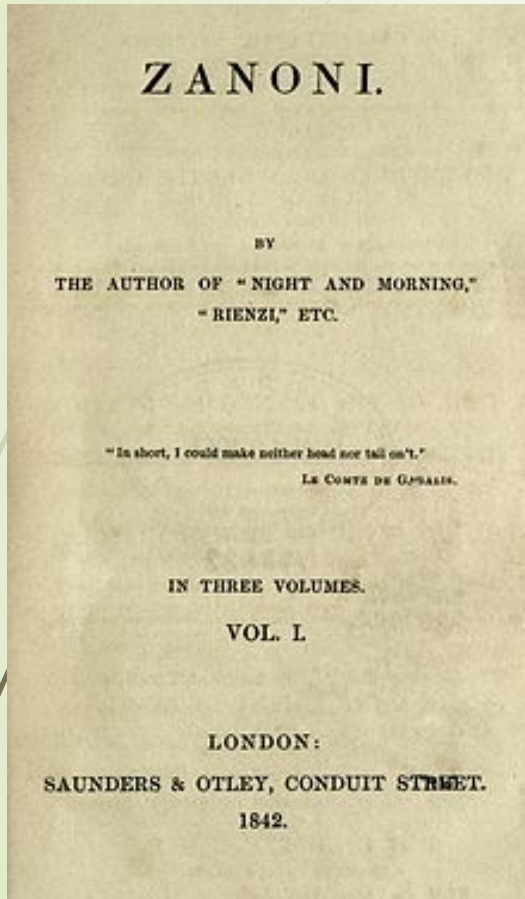
A Dime Novel Péladan

- Sâr Péladan became the model for a dime novel character, Sâr Dubnotal, a Rosicrucian who solved a number of mysteries through Spiritualism and magic. Some claimed that the stories' author was the respected Norbert Sevestre (1879-1945), but a stylistic analysis shows this as improbable. The series was published by Eichler both in Germany and in France in 1909 and ran for twenty issues only

Rosicrucian Gothic Novels

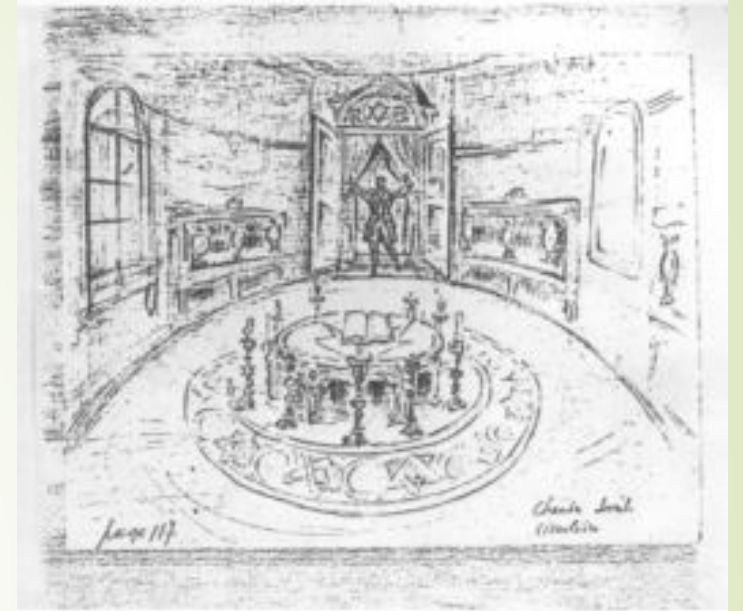
- Rosicrucians had appeared earlier in popular literature. Gothic horror novels exerted a clear influence on dime novels. In 1811, the very gothic *St. Irvyne; or, the Rosicrucian* was published anonymously in London. His author was none other than the famous poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)



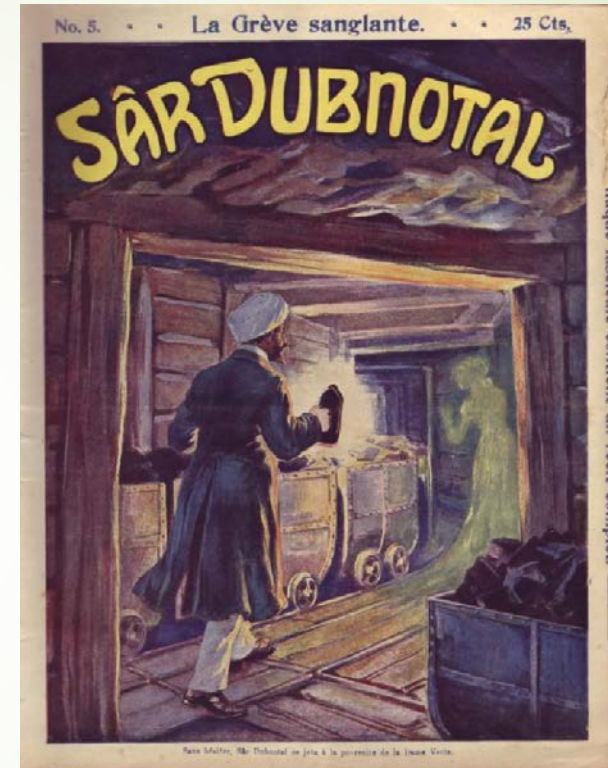


Zanoni

- Although technically not a Gothic novel, *Zanoni* (1842) by Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873) remains the most famous Rosicrucian story in English literature. Deville conceived the idea of bringing *Zanoni* to a larger audience through the theater or even a movie (right), but nothing came of it



The Great Psychagogue



- ▶ Sâr Dubnotal was «the Great Psychagogue» and his author borrowed freely from Theosophy, Spiritualism, and Rosicrucianism. Dubnotal was in telepathic contact with an Indian Master, Ranijesti, but at the same time acquired secret knowledge through Spiritualist séances and «psychognosis», a Rosicrucian system of alchemy and ritual magic

The Italian Medium

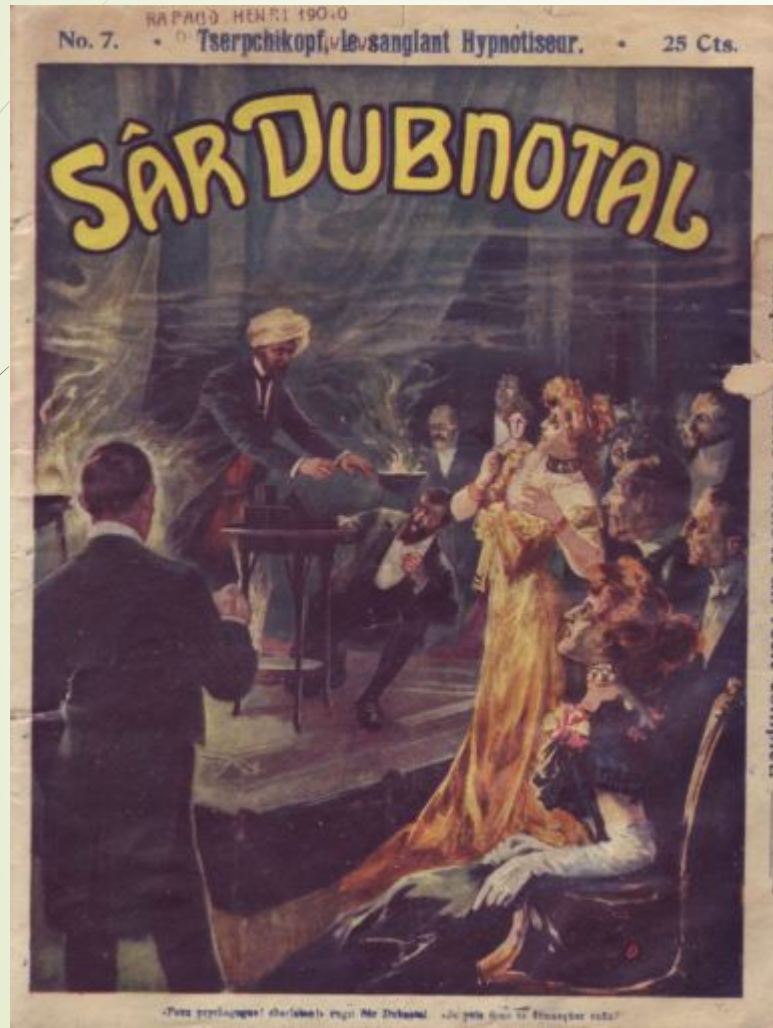
- ▶ Dubnotal contacts Master Rajinesti and several spirits through the Spiritualist medium Annunciata Gianetti, «brunette, thin, and nervous» and obviously «dressed in Italian fashion» (right)



- ▶ The character is modeled after the famous Italian medium Eusapia Palladino (1854-1918), although Annunciata is described, unlike real-life Eusapia (left), as «very attractive»



The Rosy Cross vs Jack the Ripper



- Just as Péladan claimed he had to do, Dubnotal battled a whole «host of pseudo-psychagogues and fake mediums, whose worthless conjuring tricks so often stop us as we are about to cross the sacred threshold of Mystery», The worst of these black magicians was the Russian hypnotist Tserpchikopf, later revealed to be Jack the Ripper and killed by Annunciata

4. FASCINAX VS THE BLACK LODGE



Enters Fascinax

- ▶ A direct derivation of Sâr Dubnotal (both were schooled by Indian yogis) was a later dime novel hero, Fascinax, possibly due to the well-known novelist Gustave Le Rouge (1867-1938.) The series ran for 22 issues in Paris in 1921 and had two successful Italian translations in 1924 and 1949



The Occult Doctor

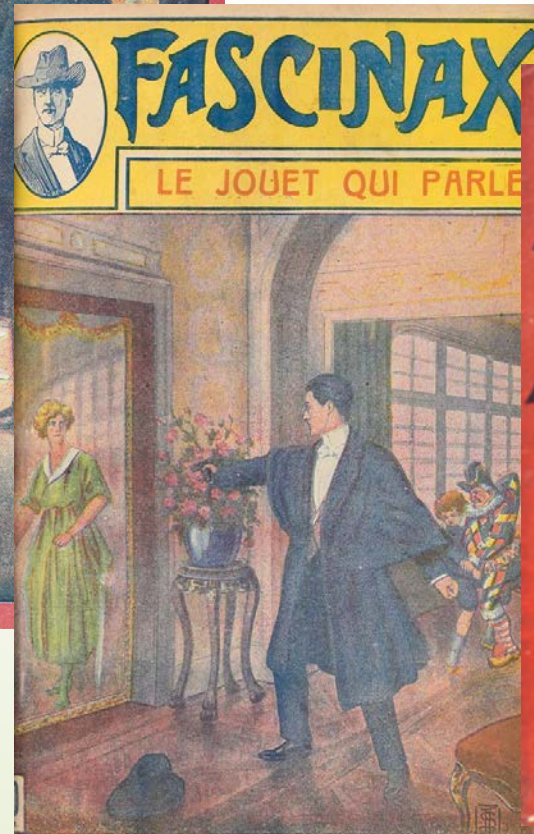


- The series started in the Philippines, with the mortal struggle between the benevolent Indian «Buddhist yogi» Nadir Kritchna and the British-born American hypnotist and black magician Numa Pergyll. The latter had Kritchna sentenced to death on false accusations

- The yogi was however saved by a British M.D., Dr George Leicester, whom he later initiated into the highest esoteric mysteries and converted into the superhero Fascinax

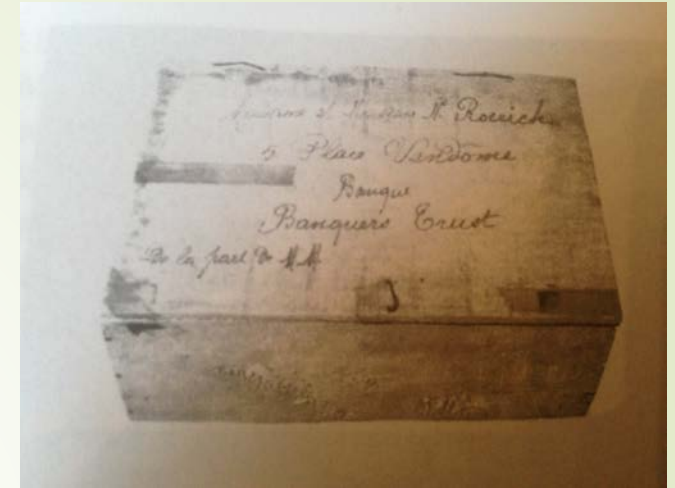
The Evil Pergyll

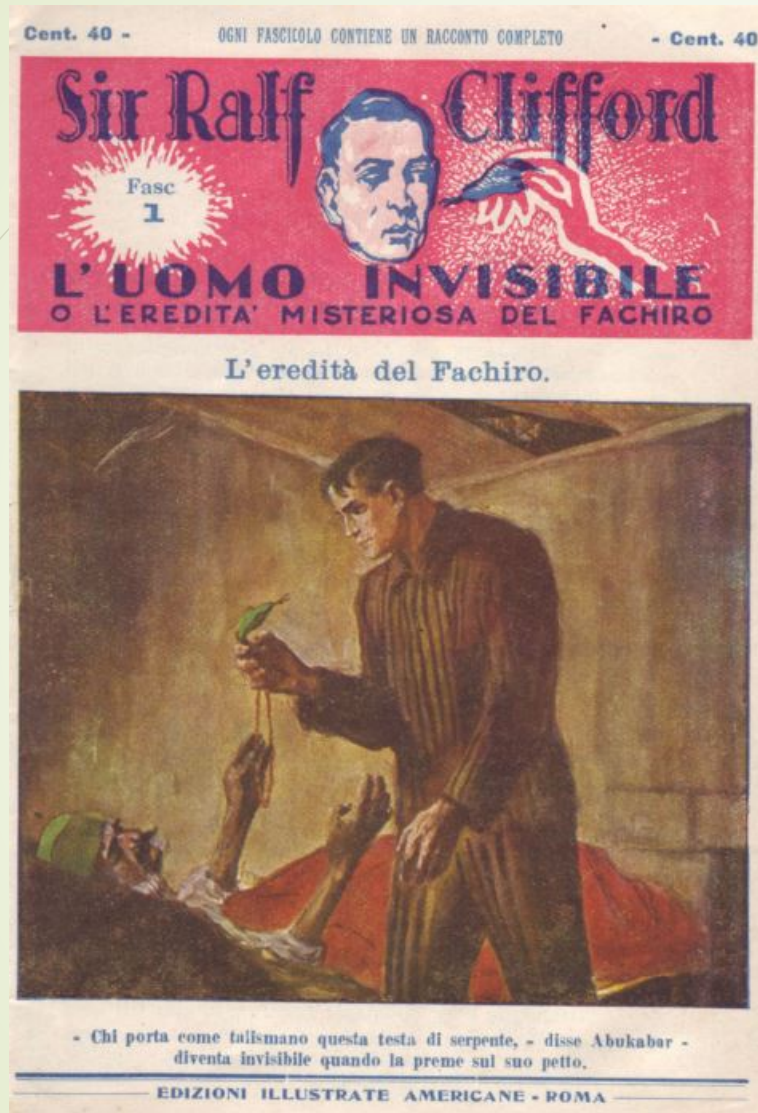
- Pergyll, however, in league with criminals and what the novels called «practitioners of 'sciences maudites'» of all sorts, continued to fight Fascinax throughout the world



The Stone of Fortune

- ▶ Fascinax received from an Indian Maharajah as a gift the Stone of Fortune, which confers to his owner mysterious powers
- ▶ Curiously, the story of Fascinax's stone was published in Paris shortly before the Russian painter Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) and his wife Helena (1879-1955), the founders of the Theosophical splinter group Agni Yoga, claimed that the Tibetan Master Morya sent to them, care of a Paris bank, a mysterious package (above) containing a piece of the Stone of Power, Chintamani (below), a «psychomagnet» transforming its owner and the world through «subtle energies»





Orientalism

- While Rosicrucianism was a *Western* esoteric tradition, often critic of Theosophy's Orientalism, dime novels spiced their Western and Rosicrucian superheroes with an Orientalist touch. Both Dubnotal and Fascinax obtained their superpowers from Oriental Masters, and Fascinax identified himself as «a Buddhist». Another popular dime novel superhero, Ralf Clifford, obtained his power of becoming invisible from the Indian «fakir» Abukabar

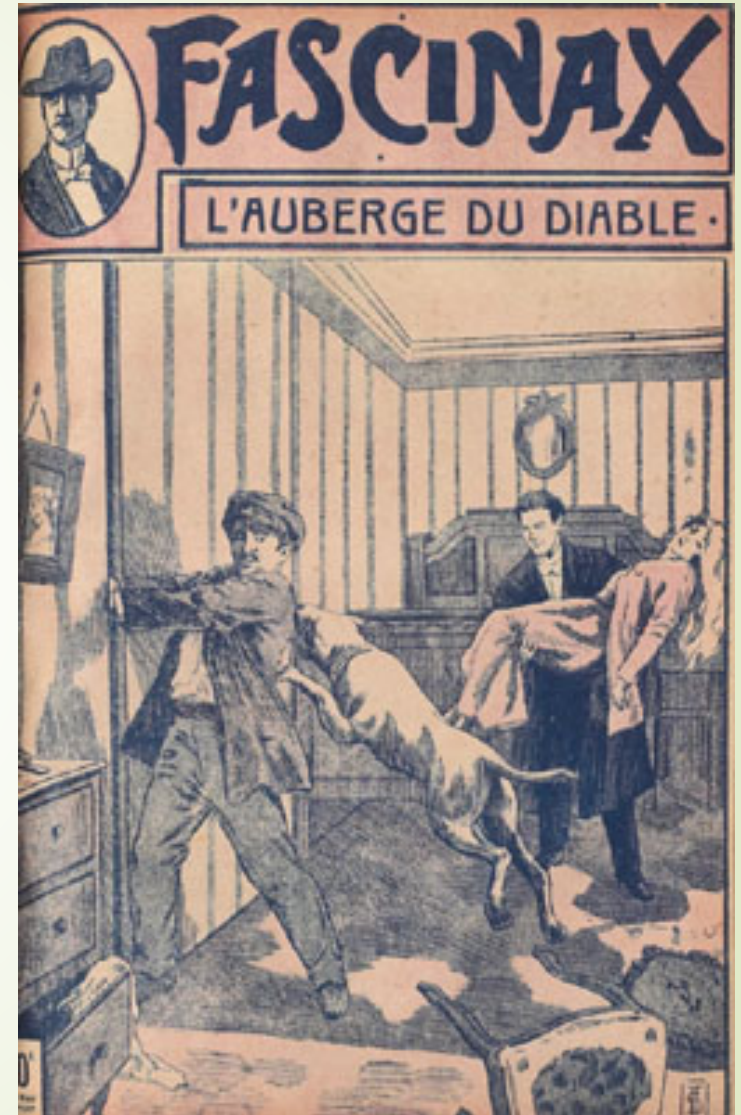


Extraterrestrials

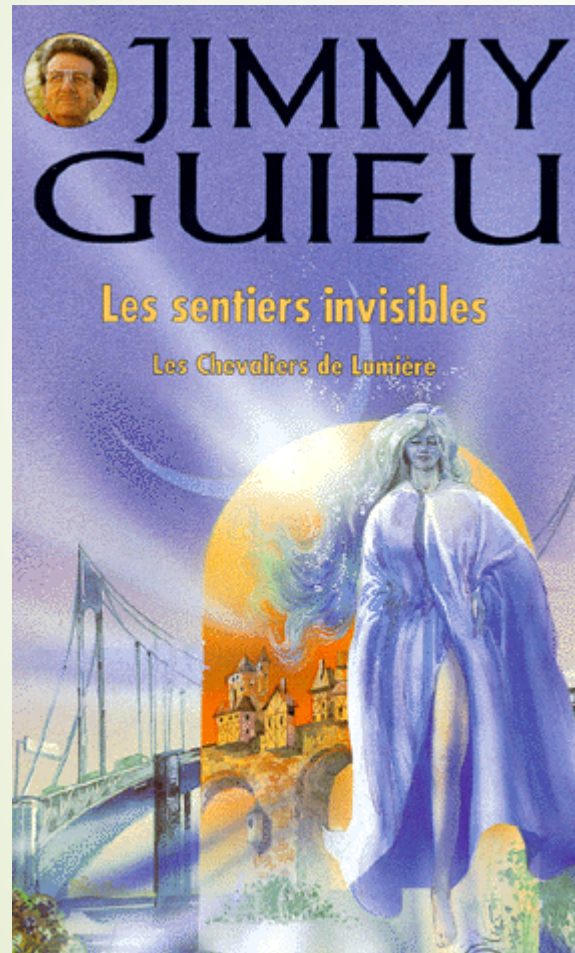
- ▶ Fascinax lasted longer than Dubnotal and survived until after World War II by incorporating new themes from popular literature and esotericism, including the idea that black magicians were in league with evil extraterrestrials. Fascinax had to fight an invasion from Planet Mars, although in the end it was revealed to be just another delusion created by Pergyll

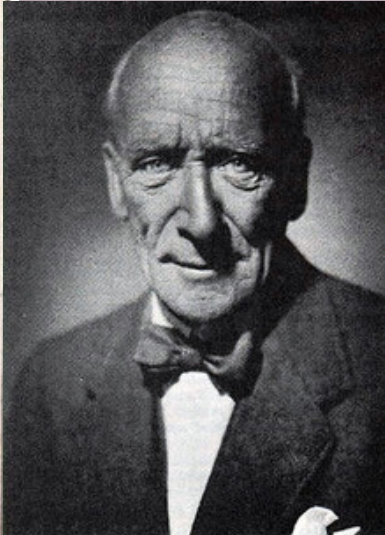
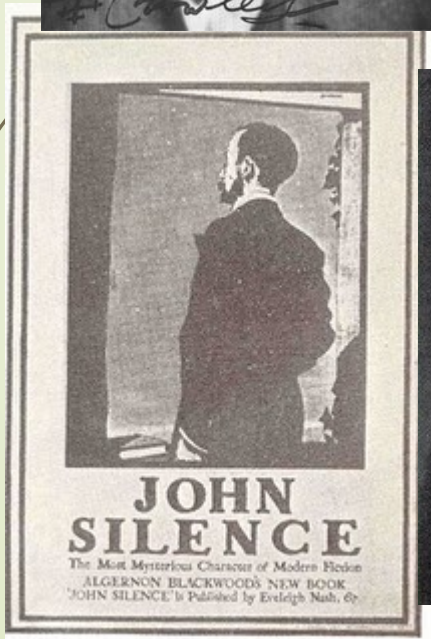
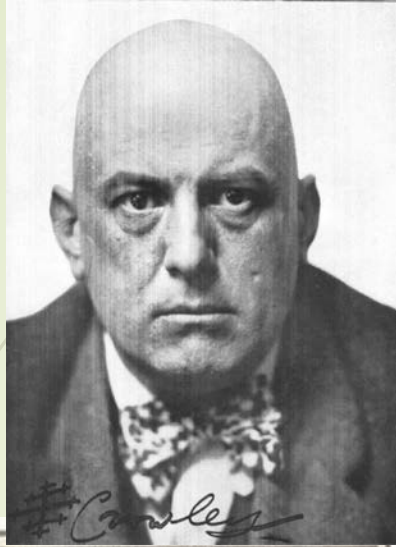
Black Magic Defeated

- ▶ While the happy end was mandatory in the dime novels, the villain could be killed off quite cruelly. Pergyll was subjugated by Fascinax and then killed by Raki, the hero's almost-human dog. «There is an immanent justice – said Fascinax to the dying black magician – and you have the death you deserve: killed by a dog...»



5. AFTERMATH: FASCINAX STRIKES AGAIN



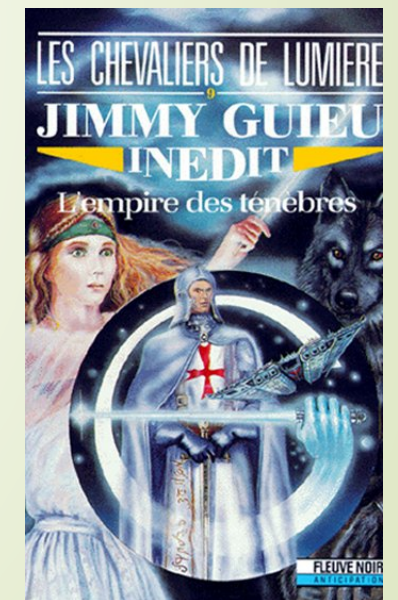
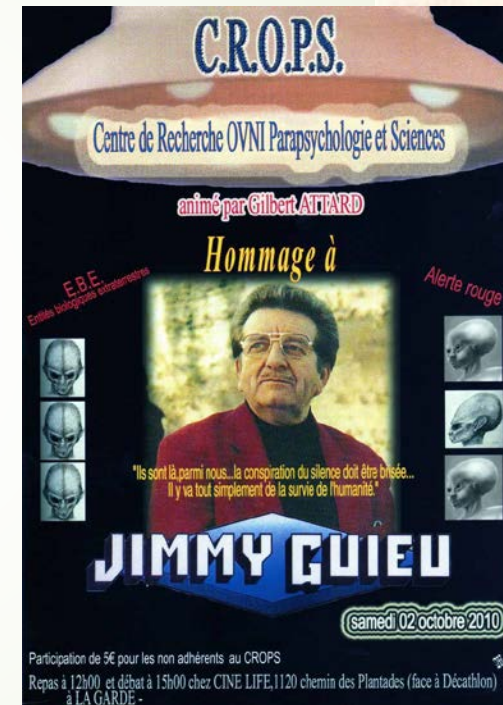


Detectives vs Superheroes

- Dime novels occult superheroes such as Dubnotal and Fascinax are different from occult detectives such as Aleister Crowley (1875-1947)'s Simon Iff and Theosophist Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951)'s John Silence, who have a certain knowledge of magic but are not superheroes

Jimmy Guieu (1926-2000)

- Dime novels are still influential, besides being collectors' items, with the scarce Dubnotals commanding exorbitant prices
- One popular French author influenced by occult dime novels was Guieu, whose career included contacts with Rosicrucian and Neo-Templar organizations, including with the controversial Julien Origas (1920-1983). A lecturer on UFO conspiracies, Guieu introduced Rosicrucian superheroes in his widely read Knights of the Light series



Belphégor: The Rosicrucians Strike Back



- In the original 1927 novel *Belphégor* by Arthur Bernède (1871-1937) a presumed ghost was revealed to be a common criminal. In the immensely successful 1965 TV series *Belphégor*, starring Juliette Gréco (left), the ghost is still a human woman, but she is hypnotized by «the cult of the Rosy Cross». Finally, in the 2001 movie *Belphegor* starring Sophie Marceau the young woman is possessed by a real spirit

Back to Kripal

- In *Mutants & Mystics* Kripal argued that the esoteric is marginalized in mainstream culture because of «religious fundamentalism and scientific materialism, which appear oddly united in their ferocious 'damning' of the paranormal», and is mostly disseminated through the alternative popular culture. Things may change, however, perhaps thanks to scholars like Kripal. The esoteric journey of painters like Kandinsky or Mondrian, once censored, is today increasingly studied by mainline art historians



Scooby-Doo and the Esoteric Revenge



- ▶ I would call, as my final witness, Scooby-Doo. In its (very mainline) stories the “supernatural” monster of the week was always unmasked as an ordinary human villain. However, just as in the evolution of Belphegor, in more recent Scooby stories quite often the ghost or vampire or yogi is exactly in the end what it appeared to be in the beginning. Scooby-addicted children are now told that the paranormal exists. Perhaps the esoteric has been truly mainstreamed...

Thank you for your attention

