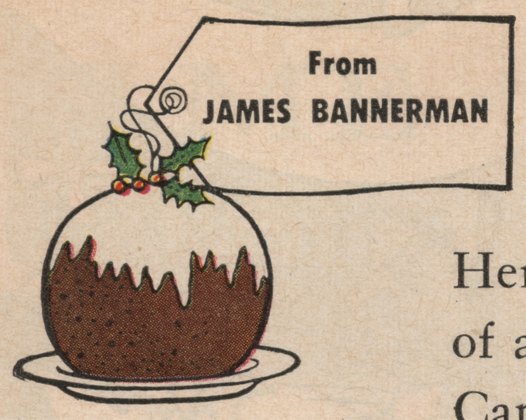
AN EXCURSION INTO CANADA WITH



Charles Dickens

Here's good Yuletide reading: the warm and lively story of a trip made to this country by the author of A Christmas Carol. For a picture of Canada a century ago—and a key to why much of it appalled Dickens — curl up with this

AT HALF-PAST NINE on an April morning in 1842, a locomotive with a tall funnel-shaped smokestack, pulling a string of spindly railroad cars, puffed to a stop at the first station out of Buffalo on the line to Niagara Falls. A smallish slender man of thirty jumped off, his olive-skinned face tense with excitement, and cupped a hand to his ear. The Falls were still miles away, but Charles Dickens characteristically couldn't wait to catch the sound of their roar. And although he couldn't, and didn't until the train got right to Niagara, he tried again at every station.

Three months earlier Dickens and his pretty wife Kate had arrived in the United States for a visit, partly to be entertained by his admirers there and partly to gather material for a travel book. They had spent a few hours at Halifax after docking there en route to Boston but now they and their secretary and Kate's maid were on their way to spend a real visit in Canada before it was time to sail for England and home. They were to go from Niagara to Montreal by way of Toronto and Kingston, with a side trip to Quebec City. Because the American tour had been so hectic and exhausting, the idea was to have a restful holiday while they were in Canada—an obvious impossibility for any party that included a man of Dickens' energy.

Several American friends had warned him not to expect too much of the Falls, but when he saw them he said "Great God! How can any man be disappointed in this!" He wasn't equally delighted with everything he found in Canada. He thought the stores in Toronto were splendid, but was horrified to learn that the losers in a recent election there had shot at the winners, and that one man had been killed and five wounded. Kingston itself was a disappointment; but he admired the penitentiary, where he saw a beautiful girl who'd stolen a horse under the most romantic circumstances and was serving a long term. At Quebec the garrison officers gave him a rousing lunch in the Citadel, but he didn't have much chance to see the town. In Montreal he loathed his hotel, but had a wonderful time producing and acting in four plays, and somehow galvanized nervous amateurs into giving a lively show.

This busy Canadian holiday was the final outcome of a letter he'd got in the fall of 1841 from Washington Irving, the creator of Rip van Winkle. Irving assured him he was so popular in America that a personal tour "would be a triumph . . . from one end of the States to the other."

Dickens was already famous as the author of Sketches by Boz, Pickwick Papers, Nicholas Nickleby and Oliver Twist; but he couldn't resist the glittering prospect of even more fame and adulation. Besides, he hoped to shame American publishers out of reprinting his work without paying him a cent, although several of them were making fortunes from it. And with a contract from his English publishers to write a book about his experiences, he and Kate and her maid sailed from Liverpool on January 4, 1842, in the little steam packet Britannia—owned and operated by a Nova Scotian named Samuel Cunard.

The crossing, which turned out to be one of the

A MACLEAN'S FLASHBACK

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DUNCAN MACPHERSON
IN THE PHIZ TRADITION

"Great God! How can any man be disappointed in this!" was Dickens' comment at the Falls. He was rowed across near Table Rock, which fell into the gorge years later.