

CHARLES DICKENS' IMPRESSIONS OF CANADA

BY H. GERALD WADE

Author of "With Boz in Montreal," "Dickens and a Merry Christmas," "Sam Slick, the Dickens of Canada," Etc.

"Canada Has Held, and Always Will Retain a Foremost Place in My Remembrance."

It is now seventy-nine years since Dickens started from Liverpool in a small paddle steamer of 1,000 tons, built by an ingenious man named Cunard, to face a fearful winter crossing the Atlantic. There is no doubt that the sketches of American life, both in fact and in fiction, given to the world on his return by Dickens largely affected the relations of the two continents to each other for many years afterwards. Dickens' description of American characters—Colonel Diver, Mr. Jefferson Brick, Major Pawkins, General Fladdock and Mr. La Fayette Kettle—probably even today still color British thought and feeling about the United States.

In his notes Dickens writes that he wished to abstain from instituting parallel whatever between the social features of the United States and Canada. He said: "Canada has held and always will retain a foremost place in my remembrance," and Canadians are second to none in their love for the works of Charles Dickens, and no English writer, no teller of Christmas tales, touches more nearly or makes his characters so real to them, characters many of whom have counterparts in our cosmopolitan country. In Canada we have five branches of the Dickens Fellowship, the Toronto branch being the largest in the world.

The most intimate connection of all between our great country and the great novelist is a personal visit he paid us in 1842, when our country was not then so great, but when the novelist was firm in his enormous popularity. And as Dickens' notes of this visit to Canada are least known, perhaps, in Canada of any of his writings, I give here what I have gleaned from his correspondence, hoping that his glimpses of old Canada may be interesting to Canadian readers.

For some time Dickens had entertained a desire to visit America, and he wrote to Forster: "I have made up my mind (with God's leave) to go to America, and to start as soon after Christmas as it will be safe to go." Of taking Mrs. Dickens with him, he said: "Kate cries dimly, but if I mention the subject, but later writes, 'Kate is quite reconciled.' Prominent among the novelist's numerous well-wishers anxious for his safe journey was the kindly humorist,

full his reply to a toast given at a banquet in his honor.

While our Canadian papers at the time seem to have made much of his visits to other places, they give very little information regarding his short stay in Halifax and other parts of Canada.

The Dickens Party were the guests of Governor Falkland in Halifax, and it was here that Boz, who was then 39 years of age, met Haliburton for the first time. The latter was then 46. He had just become Justice of the Superior Court. The meeting between these two humorists must have been an interesting one, and no doubt, a good deal of "soft sawder" was indulged in between the English and Canadian Dickens.

Thomas Hood, who composed the following witty verse:

"Here's success to all his antics,
Since it pleases him to roam,
And to paddle o'er the Atlantic
After such a sale at home.
May he shun all rocks whatever,
An' the shallow sand that lurks,
And the passage be as clever
As the best among his works!"

At length came the eventful day. "I shall never forget the fourth serious and three-fourths comical astonishment with which, on the morning of January 3rd, 1842, I opened the door and put my head into my stateroom on board the Britannia steam packet, bound for Canada, and carrying her Majesty's mails."

While Dickens could not have foreseen the luxury of our modern travel, he was quite conscious of the poor accommodation offered, for which he had to pay thirty-eight guineas, which was at that time the fare between Liverpool and Halifax. In his notes he speaks of his cabin as "an utterly impossible, impracticable, thoroughly hopeless and proudly preposterous box" of his berth he also wrote: "Something they call my bed, but which I believe to be a muffled beaten flat."

The trip across the Atlantic in mid-winter was an exceptionally rough one. Of this much-advertised, noble "paddle-wheel" ship he wrote: "Every plank and timber creaked as if the ship was made of wickerwork, and now cracked like an enormous fire of the driest possible twigs," and that he arrived safely is a wonder, judging by his unpublished private letters.

On January 20 the ship arrived at Halifax, after being sixteen days out. Dickens was met by the member for Halifax, Honorable Joseph Howe, and escorted to the House of Assembly, where he sat at the right hand of the Speaker, the Honorable L. G. W. Archibald, and gave a short address. Of this event he says, "The ceremonial and forms observed were so closely copied and so gravely presented on a small scale that it was like looking at Westminster through the wrong end of a telescope."

"The Nova Scotian" has a long article regarding Dickens, giving in

In answer to the charge that Sam Slick was merely a Yankee version of Sam Weller, and it may be stated that the first number of Pickwick Papers appeared in 1836, a year after the early chapters of the Clockmaker appeared. They were published by Joseph Howe, and were widely copied in the American Press, and also had a wide circulation in England, so there is no doubt that Boz was influenced, to a certain extent at least, by the Clockmaker.

After the appearance of American Notes, (which caused such a storm across the Border), Sam Slick was vehement in his criticisms of Dickens' alleged ingratitude. It is interesting to note that in 1858 Thackeray, Sam Slick and Dickens were fellow-members of the Athenaeum Club.

Of Halifax Dickens said the whole aspect was cheerful, thriving and industrious, and he carried away with him a most pleasant impression of the town and its inhabitants. He writes:

"Nor was it without regret that I returned home without having found an opportunity of returning and once more shaking hands with the friends we made."

Over two weeks was spent in Montreal and Quebec. This part of his Canadian trip he seemed to enjoy very much, especially his visit to the officers at the barracks. They were guests at Rasco's (not "Pease's" as Forster and other authorities print it) hotel, St. Paul street, Montreal. In Dickens' time it was considered the finest hotel in Canada. The hotel with the original name on it can be seen today, and its wide and generous fire-places hint its former glory. It is the only building associated with Dickens that remains in Canada today. While there Dickens and his wife made many friends and enjoyed a number of delightful drives. Boz wrote:

"Our drives were made doubly interesting by the bursting out of spring which is here so rapid that it is but a few days leap from barren winter to the blooming youth of summer." The streets of Montreal he described as being "generally narrow and irregular, the city displaying a



J. MURRAY GIBBON, President of the Canadian Author's Association.

great variety of good shops and many excellent dwellings."

It was in Montreal that Dickens won his first great laurels as an actor at the Old Queen's Theatre, at the eastern extremity of St. Paul street, on May 24th and 25th, in a performance arranged by the officers of the Coldstream Guards, who were at that time stationed there. "The play presented was 'A Roland for an Oliver,' and a farce entitled 'Deaf as a Post.'" Sir Charles Bagot and Sir Richard Jackson and their staffs were present and the military portion of the audience were all in full uniform. The theatre was lighted with gas and the scenery was excellent. "I really do believe that I was very funny," he wrote to Forster, "at least I know that I laughed heartily; at myself but only with a roar all through; but I only think of Kate playing, and playing devilish well I assure you."

During his stay in Montreal Dickens made a short trip with his wife to the good old city of Quebec and was much charmed (as we all are to this day) by its interest and beauty. He wrote, "The impression made upon the visitor by this Gibraltar of America its giddy heights, its citadel suspended as it were in the air, its picturesque, steep streets and its splendid views which burst upon the eye at every turn is at once unique and lasting. The dangerous precipice, along whose rocky front Wolfe and his brave companions climbed to glory; the Plains of Abraham, where Wolfe received his mortal wound, are not the least among the associations clustering about it which would make a desert rich in interest."

He left Montreal on May 30th and his last greeting in Canada was from the officers at the barracks, and with "Rule Britannia" sounding in his ears he sailed away.

After his visit he wrote of Canada, "Few Englishmen are prepared to find it what it is—advancing quietly, old differences settling down and being fast forgotten, public feeling and private enterprise alike in a sound and wholesome state, nothing of flush or fever in its system, but health and vigor throbbing in its steady pulse. To me, who had been accustomed to think of it as something left behind in the strides of advancing society, as something neglected and forgotten slumbering and wasting in its sleep, the demand for labor and the rates of wages, the busy quays, the vessels taking in their cargoes and discharging them, the amount of shipping in the different ports, the commerce, roads and public works—all made to last—the respectability and character of the public journals and the amount of rational comfort and happiness which honest industry may earn, were very great surprises."

It is now fifty years since Charles Dickens returned from the second visit. Unhappily, his life was too far spent for him to place on permanent record the changes in his impressions about the American people. He was to produce no second novel on American life which would unwrite the harsh judgments of "Martin Chuzzlewit." It would have been better for the relations between the two countries if he could have built up into one of his immortal novels the various kindly impressions of the American people which are now contained only in his Biography and Letters. There is nothing, for instance, in "Martin Chuzzlewit" to convey the judgment everywhere recorded by Dickens in his intimate writings, both in 1842 and 1868, as to the amazing courtesy of the Americans toward women. It was in 1842 that he wrote from Boston:

"There is universal deference paid to ladies, and they walk about at all seasons wholly unprotected." A remarkable tribute to a rough and early civilization. Or again, his description of their habits at the rough meals which he otherwise loved so little—"Nobody will sit down to any one of these meals, though the dishes are smoking on the board, until the

CANADIAN ROMANCES, WHY AND HOW I WRITE THEM

By Robert Watson

Author of "The Spoilers of the Valley," Etc.

That there should be a reason for everything that is worth while, passes without the necessity for proof. That a man, whose vocation is strenuous business, should choose as his avocation the making of Canadian Romances, in preference to spending his entire leisure hours—few as they are—at some diversion less exacting, does, to the lay mind, seem to demand a little explaining.

In the first place, I have always loved literature in all its diversified forms. Reading, to me, is a sublime happiness, and writing—particularly that of a creative nature—an all-absorbing and worry-chasing pastime. That novel writing is fraught with difficulties, which require deep concentration and much industry to overcome, does not in any way detract from its being a real pastime to me.

It is an old exploded theory that a poet or a novelist lives forever in the clouds and that he is no business-man; that art and trade cannot combine in one individual. Personally, I have always found that a change of work is as good as a holiday to the mind and to the body. After a strenuous day's accounting, nothing can re-energise and brighten my flagging mental faculties like the concentration for an hour or two in the production of creative literature; nothing helps me to forget the ceaseless army of numbers that march relentlessly through the brain of a man of figures after his day's work is over, as does this refreshing dip into the sea of romance; nothing so paves the way for a glorious night's sleep as necessary for recuperating the energies for the next day's toil, as a romp over the green fields of your imagination with the children you have created from your fancy.

Again, I have found my daily work of accounting the finest aid in the world in the production of a romance. Not the creative part of the production—for that belongs to art alone, but the part that shows the workman: correct spelling, exactness in word marshalling incidents, the faculty for noting things for future reference, carefulness in detail, scrupulous attention to a sure foundation upon which to build, and proper construction; never passing up a mistake, because of the accountant's knowledge that mistakes show up sooner or later with dire results. Thus do I feel certain that we are the better business-men because of our fondness for writing stories; thus do I consider we are the better novelists of our business taining.

Then there is another reason why Canada's novelists are chiefly business and professional men and women, farmers and school-teachers. Generally speaking, they do not set out to be writers as a matter of business, but do so on account of the creative urge that is within them and that goads them on to production in spite of themselves. That too is one reason why Canada's writers should be as great, as if not greater than, the authors of the older nations. They do not take up the profession of letters as they would blacksmithing, cobbling or store-keeping, as many authors of other nationalities do without consideration of their lack or otherwise of the inherent equipment for the work. Canadian writers learn a profession apart from that of literature and later become writers because of that inward compelling which, after all, is alone the real signal that one possesses the talent for such labor. As a rule, the Canadian author cannot take up authorship otherwise than as an avocation, because the day is not yet when Canada has proved herself willing to support her writers. Consequently, for what we have of Canadian Literature—and it is very considerable indeed—we are indebted to the self-sacrifice of her business, professional and farming sons and daughters, who, heedless of the call

of the open and the attractions of social life, have been willing to set these pleasures aside and to cloist themselves with their creative work in the higher cause of something for Canada.

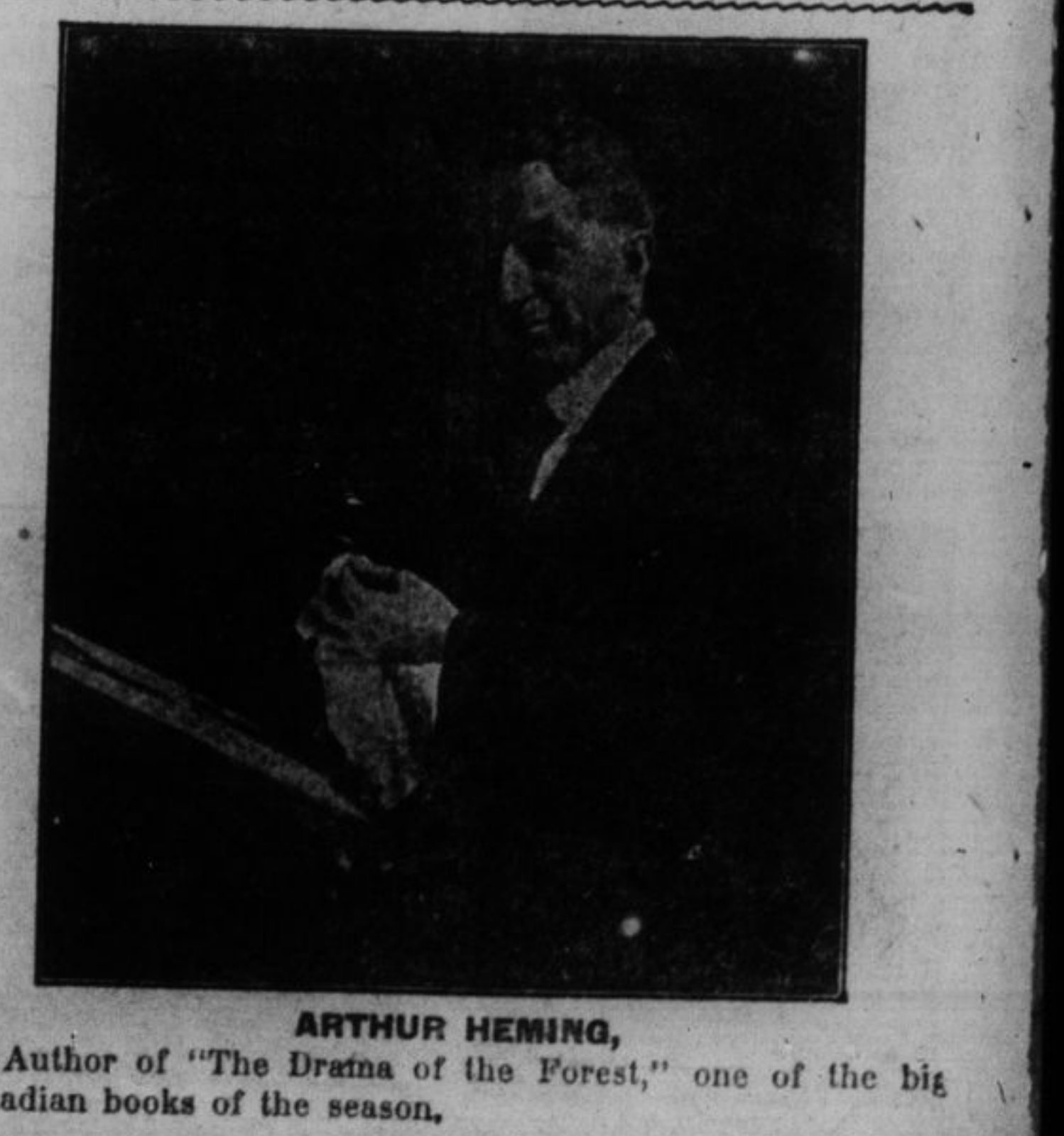
But it is not that Canada cannot support her literary people so much as it is an indifference, or rather a thoughtlessness that has pervaded the mind of the general Canadian reader. Canada contributes hundreds of thousands of dollars every year toward the support of the literary producers of the United States, Great Britain and other countries, but she expends practically nothing at all in comparison on the purchase of Canadian literature by Canadians. And how very different it is in the United States where the people support their own literature almost to the exclusion of any other. What American bookseller, for instance, would think of having a "Canadian Book Week"? When they have any Book Weeks, they have American ones. Yet, only a few months ago, our shop windows and our book-sellers' counters showed to us Canadians that we were having an "American Book Week" almost thus: upon us.

Our markets are afford with United States literature. Not that I complain of the very commendable enterprise of our United States neighbors in laying siege to our book markets but rather of the lack of foresight and forethought on our part in laying ourselves so widely open to it. When we desire a book to read, we have got into the thoughtless habit of asking for a Zane Grey, a Harold Bell Wright, a Jack London, a Rex Beech, a Peter B. Kyme, a Rupert Hughes or an R. W. Chambers; in fact, any kind of a book but a Canadian one by a Canadian; and the only Canadian authors we are able to recall to memory at such a moment are, possibly, Ralph Connor and Sir Gilbert Parker and we excuse ourselves—if we feel that any excuse is really necessary—that we have read all their books. Yet, we have some two hundred and fifty authors alive and of good repute in Canada today, many of whom are producing books every year or so as interesting and as meritorious as those of the United States authors whom I have named—and would do even better if they were encouraged. But we have not taken the trouble, or let me say the pleasure of reading out their true value for ourselves; we have allowed other countries to dictate our reading matter to us and we have permitted ourselves to be carried away by their flaring advertisements and their clever publicity stunts.

I set out in this article to discuss "Why and How I write Canadian Romances" and I have got away from the subject, but, after all, not so very far away. Why do I write Canadian Romances? I write them because of a definite ambition within me to help in some way—in the way I feel I am best fitted—to make Canada a little more Canadian; to contribute my few roughly chiselled stones to that great Monument of Canadian Literature which, some day, will raise its stately pile where all the world must see it and, seeing, will admire.

How do I write Canadian Romances? I find time to do so by the simple process of eliminating all time-wasting pursuits and I do so by dint of sheer hard work, but work of a nature that I dearly love.

And now, we get back to the all-important part. What good is it for a Canadian to write a Canadian book for Canadians, if Canadians do not read it? This has been termed the "home-brew" of Fellow-Canadians, give the "home-brew" a chance this year and you will come back for more next year; make it worth while for your Canadian authors to go on with their work for Canada and you will not be disappointed in them.

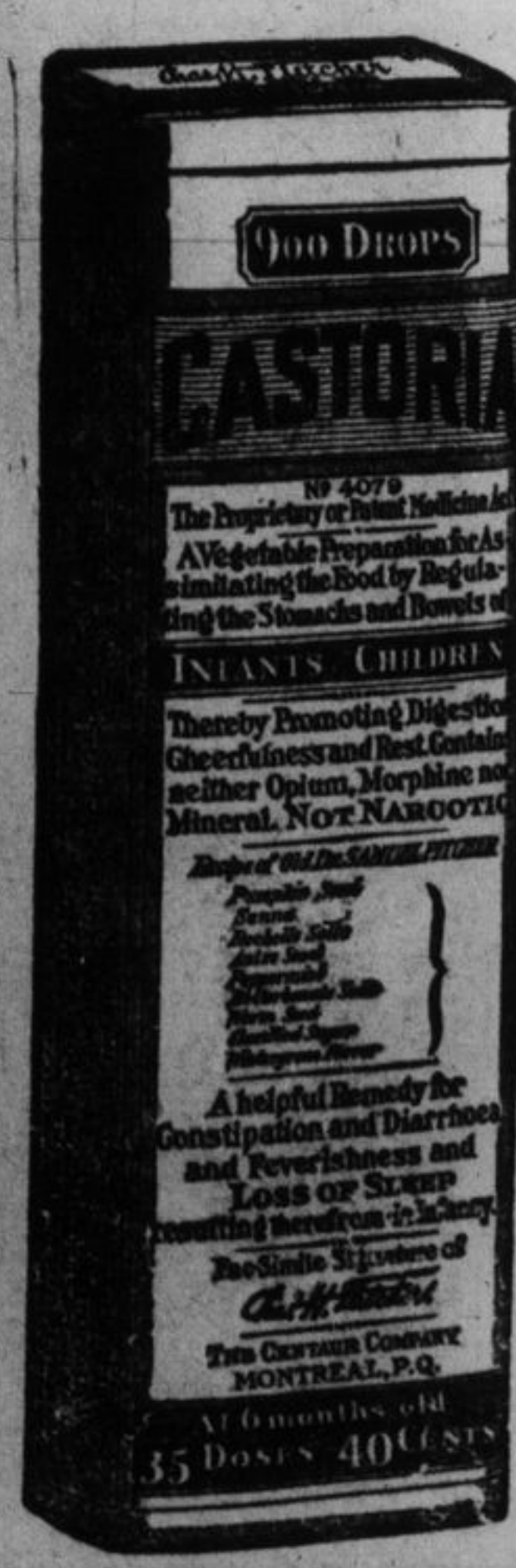


ARTHUR HENNING, Author of "The Drama of the Forest," one of the big Canadian books of the season.

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