

THE MEANEST MAN IN CANADA.

By J. H. SMYTHE

When I went to Canada nearly thirty years ago and took up land in the "Many Island Lake" district of Southern Alberta, there were very few settlers in that part of the state.

In fact in an area larger than the whole of Aberdeenshire you could count the ranches on the fingers of one hand.

Until the Canadian government threw open the land for closer settlement the whole country was practically owned - or I should more correctly say, ruled by a few big ranchers.

These ranchers claimed the land by what they called right of Squatage, a self constituted ownership which however carried no real title to the ground. Nevertheless these early pioneers bitterly contested the government's right to survey the land for closer settlement, arguing that

by virtue of long and original occupation the land was rightfully theirs, and I would not like to say that they had not some grounds for their feeling of injustice.

When one considers how much we owe to those hardy adventurers, who faced and endured untold dangers and difficulties in a new and savage country and paved the way to future peace and prosperity; we can understand what the loss of the land they fought for meant to them.

Perhaps the government to a certain extent did realize how much it owed them, for grants of land were given to many of the old time squatters.

As can be imagined the more embittered ranchmen were greatly opposed to the scheme of closer settlement; as it meant a drastic

curtailment of their boundaries and consequently of stock and produce. Many however welcomed the advent of the homesteader - or settler - as the prospective farmers were called, for they could see it was for the ultimate benefit of all.

Besides that there were immediate opportunities of doing good business with the new arrivals, who no doubt would ^{require} much that they could supply.

Old Tom Stephenson was one of those who were in favour of closer settlement, for though he too was a squatter, he also actually owned a section of splendid prairie land. This section lay along the main trail through the Territory and Tom - who was a shrewd old fellow - foresaw a ready sale for lots so conveniently situated and so it turned out.

Before long he had sold quite a

number of homestead blocks at remunerative prices, yet no more than the actual value of the land, as was subsequently proved by the new owners.

One of the first to purchase a block from Tom was a young Englishman called Jim Fallon, who sunk his all in a homestead and set to work to wrest a living from it for himself, his wife and baby.

Jim seemed in a fair way to succeed too, for he was a tireless worker and before long had a house and farm built, most of his land fenced and quite an area laid down to wheat.

Then disaster, sudden and complete overtook him.

Just on the eve of his first harvest, a huge prairie fire came roaring up from the West, devouring everything in its path.

and leaving in its wake a blackened, smoking trail of ruin and desolation.

Fallon's place was right in the line of the rapidly advancing inferno, and he and his family just escaped in the nick of time.

They were no more than clear ~~when~~ before the fire swept over the homestead, licked the place clean with a tongue of flame, and blazed away westward on its ravenous career.

I think there are few more terrifying sights than a prairie fire - except perhaps a really big bush fire such as I have experienced in B. C. and Australia.

It is almost unbelievable the speed at which a prairie fire travels and many a tragedy of the West can be attributed to the ignorance of new settlers of this fact.

Travelling faster than a good horse

Can gallop a prairie fire leaves one little time for salvage work or indeed doing anything to stay or divert its fiery onward surge.

Though ~~it~~ it was, even in those early days, compulsory to plough fire breaks round your holding, ~~but~~ there were seldom ploughed wide enough to be of much protection against a really big fire, and the most one could hope or pray for was a change of wind or time to escape.

I remember once when a sudden change of wind saved me in good stead.

I was camped in a dry coulee east of Medicine Hat one fall when a fire broke out some miles to the west of me and fanned by a fairly strong breeze headed in my direction faster than I cared about.

You may be sure I did not stand upon the order of my going, but went and that speedily, leaving

my camp and all it contained at the mercy of the fire.

I stayed on a small hill which had been burnt over earlier in the year, all night, and in the morning went back to the coulee to have a look at the wreck of my home and fortunes.

To my surprise and delight I found my camp intact, every thing just as I had left it, but the prairie was burnt to within 300 yards of the tent on the west side and then the fire had veered round to the north - ~~the~~ wind had suddenly shifted.

That fire I may say, ran north for over forty miles, burning out three homesteads on its way and destroying much pasture and stock.

All I lost was a barrel of water which I capsized in my headlong rush for safety - it sure was my lucky day.

Well it was just in such fashion

that Jim Fallon lost the whole fruits of his labour, and was practically a ruined man at the very outset of his career, yet truly thankful that the lives of his loved ones had been spared.

There was however a fine spirit of camaraderie amongst those early pioneers of the West and as soon as his neighbours heard of Jim's misfortune they at once opened a subscription list for his benefit.

The Presbyterian minister was one of the most energetic canvassers on Fallon's behalf and journeyed far and wide soliciting donations meeting a generous response from everyone, with one exception.

The exception was old Tom Stephenson, and all the personal efforts and entreaties were of no avail against the proud blank refusal of the old rancher to donate one cent.

Finally seeing he could make no

impression on the hard hearted old man, the parson left in righteous indignation and no richer than he came, but determined to broadcast the account of his fruitless interview with the owner of the Lazy AT throughout the whole country.

So it was then that very soon Southern Alberta from Big Stick Lake to the Sarnis Flats echoed the story of Tom's meanness - that is until the sequel to the episode became known.

In the evening of the same day on which the padre called, the old rancher told Scotty and Jack Loffelblein to round up a bunch of mixed stock grazing near by and run ~~the~~ it into the corral.

While this was being done Tom buried himself writing a letter.

Then —

bunch of mixed stock which was grazing near by the ranch, and run it into the corral, and while this was being done Tom busied himself writing a letter.

Follow from here → Then two mares with foals at foot, two cows and a couple of two year old steers were cut out from the milling crowd in the corral, confined by themselves and the others again set at liberty.

Scotty and Jack were then ordered to run the remaining eight head down to Fallon's pasture - a small fenced paddock which had by some lucky chance escaped the worst heat of the fire - and after driving them in, shut the gate and come away without a word to the burnt out nester or anyone else they might chance to meet.

Next day Scotty was sent to town with the letter with instructions to the postmaster to read it, and then have it pinned up on the public notice board.

I might say here that Schroeder the postmaster, combined that office with those of storekeeper and interpreter and it was in consequence of his linguistic abilities therefore that the letter was addressed to him ^{*you see*} his services in that latter capacity were in constant demand by the strange mixture of races which flowed into the country from every immigrant train from the East, and Tom knew that his letter would be duly translated by the worthy postmaster for the benefit of all who had difficulties with the English language. A strange letter it was which Schroeder slowly read to himself and afterwards translated to/

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to his varied clients and a letter which caused a sudden revulsion of opinion regarding the hardness of heart of old Tom.

Written in the old rancher's crabbed and unorthodox characters the letter was as follows:-

"To All Whom It May Concern"

The two sorrel mares with their colts, the two red cows and two white faced steers, running in Jim Fallon's paddock and wearing my brand are now his property for reasons which are my concern.

Thomas Stephenson

The Lazy A.T. Alta. "

It was in such manner then that old Tom subscribed to Fallon's relief fund - not in cash but in kind and when the value of his gift was reckoned in terms of dollars and cents it was at once apparent who was the most liberal donor, and it was a rather shamefaced and apologetic committee which went to thank the old fellow for his handsome contribution.

So it was then that the reputed meanest man in Canada belied his reputation and in a night became famous and honoured as one of her leading philanthropists. Some time afterwards I asked old Tom his reason for refusing the parson's request for a subscription and the answer I got in the rancher's soft drawl was:-

"Well /

"Well Scotty I guessed those fellows who donated big money were not so darned generous as they appeared and had some scheme figured out for getting some of it back again and I was not off the trail either.

You see son, they knew Jim would have to buy fresh stock, and this they planned to sell him at their own figure, as they reckoned - and rightly - that Jim, feeling he was deep in their debt, would not refuse to purchase, even though he could see he was being well and truly stung, ~~and~~ so it has turned out, half the cash they donated is back in their pockets again, but I took darned good care that none of mine went to help pay their subscription".

I understood then what the post-master meant when he remarked that "That old wise guy Solomon had nothing on Tom Stephenson, and I guess there were no flies on that old mossy horn".

I guessed so too.

New Sentence beginning
"So