

Roger Wrayburn's Promise

Written for The Western Home Monthly, by Herbert Higginbotham

A LONG, black line, beginning at the door of a small, white-painted mission hall and stretching southwards along the east side of Third Street, gradually forced itself upon the notice of Roger Wrayburn, walking to his hotel in the city of Edmonton about half-past ten on the evening of May 13th in the year of our grace 1912, causing him first to pause and then deliberately to cross over to the other side of the street. His mind was occupied by thoughts of his betrothed and of his approaching marriage, so that it was not surprising that this unexpected interruption of his train of thought gave him a slight feeling of annoyance.

Curiosity had its way. In spite of his obsession, Roger, after an effort, realized that something extraordinary was toward; but he was not aware that he had stumbled, quite by accident, upon the scene of one of the biggest and most remarkable "land rushes" in the history of the Northwest. Nearly a thousand people, many of whom had travelled hundreds of miles, from the Pacific coast on the west and from Winnipeg and points beyond in the east in order to be present at the sale of lots in the Hudson's Bay Reserve, situate in the heart of the rapidly growing capital of Alberta, sat, sleeping and waking, through the cold night, on the comfortless sidewalks. Fifteen hundred people waited in line, while thousands more thronged the streets, until well into the afternoon of the hot, stifling day which followed.

A conversation between two fur-coated men, sitting on boxes with their backs against the railings of a lot, gave Roger Wrayburn the clue to what was going on.

"Fifteen hundred tickets are to be issued."

"Yes, and you can figure on getting a few bucks for any number up to three hundred. Nobody's allowed to buy more than four lots, and there are thirteen hundred to be sold."

"I'd like to be the lucky gink to pick number one."

"Bet your life I would, too."

"They say McDougall & Secord have offered \$15,000 for that ticket."

Roger, now thoroughly aroused from his dream, did not wait to hear more. He recollected that the draw for tickets entitling the holders to buy Hudson's Bay Reserve lots was to take place on the morrow and that the newspapers had foretold a rush for the tickets, predicting that the earlier numbers would command fancy prices. Blaming himself for having so nearly missed this opportunity, he took his stand at the end of the line, which already extended half way along the south side of the block, longing, yet not daring to hope, that the magic wheel of fortune that would turn on the following day might remove the only bar to his immediate prospect of happiness with his beloved Margaret.

Roger Wrayburn had been destined by his father to become a member of the legal firm of Wrayburn & Son, the respected firm of family solicitors doing the largest legal practice in the ancient borough of Rugby, England. He had been educated at the famous Rugby Public School and he might have gone to Oxford, there to win distinction in academic studies; but his heart was closer to nature than to the classics. His big, manly frame required a life of toil and strenuous physical effort. In turning his back on his father's profession, he had decided to become a farmer, and in pursuit of his aim he resolved upon emigration, choosing rather to carve out his own fortune than to rely upon his father's assistance.

Sunny Alberta appealed to him more than all the other provinces of Canada. When he reached Edmonton early in 1908 he had hired out to work on the farm of Richard Lowe at Clover Bar. During the year that he had spent on the Lowe farm, by his hard work and respect for his employer's interests, he had won the friendship of the practical

farmer whom he served. More important still, for Roger, he had won the heart of winsome Margaret Lowe. Well educated and bright of mind, Margaret had felt herself drawn to the cultivated English boy.

In their Sunday rides to and from church a close friendship had sprung up between them, and before Roger left to take up his homestead in the beautiful Peavine Valley, lying north-west of Edmonton, their friendship had ripened into love. When released from his homestead duties Roger had been able to pay frequent visits to the Lowe farm, and when Richard Lowe divined how things stood between his daughter and young Wrayburn he had raised no objection.

So far as Wrayburn's homestead was concerned, everything had prospered under his hand. Since Margaret had promised, nearly a year ago, to become his wife, every furrow that he had turned had seemed to bring him a step nearer to his happiness. The thought of her gave him increased vigor as he went out to his day's work in a morning; when he returned from his labor at the close of day the vision of her who would some day welcome him at his own door refreshed him.

During the winter season Roger had been working on his house and had finished it with lumber hauled from the saw-mill at Whitecourt. The house was as cosy a little place as one could desire, and Roger felt proud of it. His great regret now was that he had not money left with which to buy the piano and sitting-room suite which he had promised to get for Margaret. While never doubting the quality of her love for him, he thought it would be breaking faith on his part to ask her to begin without them, and he had paid an unexpected visit to the Lowe farm with the object of confessing his inability to fulfil his promise and offering to postpone the wedding until after the harvest.

Roger had hoped to unburden his heart to Margaret on their ride from Clover Bar to Edmonton on that Sunday afternoon, but the joyousness that nature breathed into the air made it all the more difficult for him to sound a jarring note. As they rose and fell gently in their saddles, their horses' hoofs beat a merry tune on the well-trodden trail, while from the clumps of bush came the song of the blackbird serenading his mate and keeping a close lookout for the approach of a possible enemy. Joy, full-measured, shone in the countenance of the handsome, well-formed girl who kept even pace at his side, riding with that smooth grace that belongs only to the woman of the prairies.

"A penny for your thoughts," Margaret had said, using one of Roger's own expressions as she caught him, for the third time, gazing abstractedly ahead.

"I doubt whether they would be worth even two cents," Roger had replied, as he turned and saw the look of slight perplexity on Margaret's face.

They were now within sight of Edmonton and the sun was setting in the west, where it hung suspended in a sea of gold and purple over the shadow-filled valley of the Saskatchewan. At the top of the hill, overlooking the river, they paused to take in the full glory of the scene.

"The golden West!" said Roger, with a touch of awe in his voice. "One is almost impelled to wonder whether it is not in some such place as this that there shall be found that new heaven and new earth. It seems almost impossible that such a great city, so full of promise of greater things yet to be, could have come into existence and grown to its present stature in one generation. On the bank yonder stands the old Hudson's Bay fort and rising just behind it the stately new Parliament buildings—what a contrast!"

"Yes, Edmonton was only a village when Dad came here twenty years ago," Margaret replied, adding, wistfully, "I



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