

# THE CLAIM-JUMPERS

*Showing that even in "Bad Men" of the Prairies there is Sentiment*

IF a pesky freight train had not spilled itself all over the main

By HERMAN WHITAKER

Illustrated by Tom O. Marten,

line, I should never have heard this story, which was told by the liveryman of a small Manitoba town to the landlord of the hotel where I had just dined, as we all three took a nooning on the verandah.

It, the town, was of the usual prairie brand. A single street of clapboard buildings ran along the railway tracks out to sun-scorched prairie at either end. Unlike the railway, which came spinning out from the western horizon to flash on over the eastern as though it had business to perform, the street was absurdly violent in its beginnings and endings; gave one a casual feeling as though it had broken from some city and dumped by a cyclone in the dead center of surrounding flatness. Just now it was very quiet. An ox-team crawled slowly along its length, a Red River cart, driven by a Cree squaw, creaked heavily by, and these represented the traffic. Among the tomato cans that strewed vacant lots, the town cattle pastured peacefully, pausing to gaze with mild wonder at the sow which lumbered up street with a dog hanging to either ear.

It was after his interested gaze had returned from the sow that the liveryman began to talk. Indicating a woman who had just come out from a nearby store, he remarked: "Mrs. Smith couldn't throw a shadow like that when she first hit this town. Remember how thin and pale she was, Tom?"

Regarding the comfortable silhouette in the dust, the landlord shook his head. "That was before my time. I'd heard she wasn't in very good shape, but never got the rights of her story. Tell me—if you ain't in a hurry?"

"Rigs is all out and I've fed up." Leaning his chair at a comfortable angle against the clapboard siding, the liveryman began. "You'll have to go back to the spring of the year she came here, for the story begins right when Huggins, a Winnipeg land shark, bought section Thirty-Three, six miles north of here, from Half-Breed Joe Legault when he wasn't in condition to tell a land value from a broken whiskey jug. Some say that Huggins made Joe drunk. But I never believed it. When I knew him Joe didn't need help to crook his elbow and Huggins was one of your pious kind and that dry he'd shame a brick kiln. Only wet goods he was ever known to trade in was ten thousand acres of swamp water that he worked off in boom times on a remittance Englishman as fine, rolling wheat land. Anyway, Joe sold for a song; sold Thirty-Three, a full section, half wheat, half pasture, beautiful rolling prairie, handy to wood and water, with unlimited outside pasture, for the price of a three days' drunk. Huggins allowed that he'd made the deal of his life till, coming out to admire his property, he found that Cain McGregor and Red Dominique had been squatted on it for nigh four years.

"After that he had his doubts, for Cain McGregor stood six-feet-four in his mocasins, was broad as a door, and had a lick of savage Indian mixed in with his hard Scotch granite. Dominique was small, red and poisonous as a tarantula when crossed; considered, indeed, the most dangerous of the two. Half cattle-thief and half general bad man, they had squatted on Thirty-Three with one old cow, as orn'ery a critter as ever put foot in a milk pail; and yet for all her orn'eryness what of the fine pasture and quiet out there, she busted all records for fecundity and reproduced herself at the rate of ten calves a year—must have to account for the firm's increase.

"There was, of course, other theories. Old Man Baxter used to say that it was the very strangest how all the stray calves in a hundred-mile circle seemed to head for Thirty-Three. But nothing was ever proved, and by the time Huggins came out

to look at the place Cain and Dominique owned five milking cows and twenty head to keep out in one of my rigs. I saw him going and coming and never before did two hours make such a difference in one man. He'd have done for an advertisement 'before and after' a fire. He was sandy, himself, in colour, with a snake-cold eye and a face that read like a parchment deed, but his clothes—silk tile, black Prince Albert coat, grey check tweed trousers, he was the spit of a deacon in a fashionable church—going out, that is. Coming back? Coat tails was ripped off and the trousers depleted where Dominique's dog had clung to his duty. The tall hat resembled a winded concertina. And mad? Swore he'd put the two of them in Stony Mountain for that day's work, but kept an eye of the Thirty-Three trail while he was telling it. Dominique had sworn to eat his ears without salt if he caught him in town after train time, and Huggins didn't wait on the chance. He went, with the train, and we that saw him go read machine guns and mounted police in his eye—all but Doc' Green, who had known him in Winnipeg.

"Don't you believe it," said the Doc'. "Huggins' feelings lie too close to his pocket for him to indulge in any such rash measures. If he ejects them he's got to pay squatter improvements, and he don't do that while there's a living chance to unload on someone else!"

"He was right. A few days later Mr. Gibbons-Perceval, an English remittance man, unloaded himself from the train with an option on Thirty-Three. Now his kind hadn't even then been exactly what you'd call scarce around here, yet I wouldn't have blamed a pony for shying if it met him on the trail. Baby-blue eyes, pink face, monocle, speech sprained in the middle—like his name—so he haw-hawed like a crow on a windy morning; he went the limit in leather leggings and yellow riding

breeches. The whole town turned out to see as them wonderful garments twinkled down street when he rode out to Thirty-Three.

"Six miles out, six back. Judging by Huggins' record he ought to have been back on the train inside two hours; but as the luck ran Cain and Dominique were away on a three days' hunt and he didn't see them until, a few days later, they shoved through the crowd that was listening while Gibbons chewed hay contract with Caleb Skinner. I forgot to say that he was tickled with his first view of the place, that he'd decided to cut a hundred tons of hay, natural grass, before he went down to close the option with Huggins.

"As I say, we were all around and Caleb was explaining jest how eleven dollars a ton to cut and stack hay was away below market price, so low that he felt ashamed of himself, when Cain came shoving through and put him down and out with a single shot of his mouth. 'Me an' my partner,' he says, 'will do it for two dollars the ton.'

"Now his bid really was a dollar a ton below rates, and we all thought he was joking. However, he soon proved that he wasn't, and when the contract was closed at his figures we were left up in the air, without a line on his play.

"By the way," says Gibbons when the business was settled, and Cain and Dominique was making for their horses, 'By the way, I hear that squatters have settled on the place. If they molest you, just let me know.'

"Thanking you," Cain answers, grinning, 'but they ain't a-going to bother us much.'

"Now if Gibbons had been a Swede. Dutchman, even a Mennonite, somebody would have been sure to have cracked a whisper as to the identity of them squatters, but Gibbons' nationality was against him. Everybody allows that an Englishman of the remittance brand gets all that is coming his way, and one stare from Gibbons' monocle froze the milk of human kindness even in the breast of Baxter, the smith, who always made at least one attempt to shove in betwixt a fool and his folly. So of evening the town would perch on the edge of the hotel verandah and join Mr. Gibbons in wondering what kept them squatters so long on their hunt. We was neither surprised nor flustered when, the day after he paid for the hay, he came riding a hot trail from Thirty-Three, red-faced, bare-headed, and his monocle clean carried away.

"That big black brute took exception to it," he gasped to a sympathising circle. "Said he wouldn't have no darned dude screw a burning glass into his vitals and knocked it off my eye. When I remonstrated, the little man said that I had insulted his partner and wanted to fight me, knives or six shots across a table. Yelled after me, as I rode away, that he would come in and get me to-night."

"He's a man of his word, too," Doc' Green assures him.

"Clever as h— with the knife; cleverest I ever saw," adds Clee, who was landlord here then. "You'll remember what a mess he made of Billing, Doc'."

"Considering that I sorted the remains, yes."

"Now," Clee goes gravely on, 'I don't make no practice of lending my premises to gents for fighting purposes. Hit er miss, it plugs holes in the wall, spoils the paper, and plays pertickler h— with the crockery. I wouldn't want it told round that I'd obliged you, but seeing as you're boarding with me, belong to the family so to say, I make an exception in your favour. You an Dominique kin have the dining-room after the girl clears away supper.'

"You should have seen Gibbons gasp. 'You don't surely imagine,' he says, breathing like a frog, 'that I intend to fight a duel?'

"No! you ain't a-going to lay for him from behind a bush?" Clee remonstrates. "Tain't sportmanlike to pot your game sitting."

"Of course," Doc' Green slowly adds, 'if you are not feeling fit—the train goes in an hour.'

"Mr. Gibbons-Perceval went with it, and not till one hour after he was gone did we realise that them two rascals was just two hundred cash and a hundred tons of hay to the good on the deal.

"But Gibbons was only the beginning. After him a long train of buyers were coming or going between the town and Thirty-Three, the going being most noticeable. One man killed a broncho in his haste to tell Huggins he didn't want the



"Thanking you" Cain answered grinning.