

## The Dwellers of the Plains

By D. E. Nimmons

**O**H, it was dry, dry, dry. Old Sol poured down his rays on the dry dusty sod that had already begun to crack and shrivel. Even the little yellow and purple flowers, that in their regal combination dot the prairies, were beginning to hang their heads in shame. The air of parched drought betokened that this was one section of what is known as "The Dry Belt" of Alberta.

Governed by the great law of distance, it lies some sixty miles east of Bassano and Brooks, where irrigation reigns supreme and where all summer long our American cousins have been flocking. Once landed in this belt, unknown save to its local inhabitants, and almost the last homestead country in the province, one is forty miles from a depot to the north, twenty-five miles from a station to the south, which boasts a tri-weekly service, and ten miles from the end of a spur track that carries passengers at construction rates via baggage car at irregular intervals weekly. To the newcomer the choice of exit seems small, yet old-timers tell tales of the long weary trek of fifty or sixty miles, many a time in a blinding blizzard, that make the grumbler feel the minuteness of his complaint. Barring the great, the fascinating, Peace River country, here is another unknown that is still little beyond the pioneer stage, save for its scattered school houses. Here the old-time community spirit of give and take still thrives.

In crossing the Red Deer River going north the first point that strikes the entrant is the vast expanse of unfenced prairie. This is partly accounted for by the unexpired leases held by many of the old cattle men. Also many of the farmers have not fenced their crops. Dry years have forced others to leave the country, and their fences have been taken down, leaving a weedy waste that is most desolate. There are many empty shacks too, that bear mute evidence of the occupants seeking a further land of plenty. All these things cause the country to have a generally wild aspect.

But there are many fenced sections, too, and these possess a goodly inheritance of stones that are neatly piled along the fence, or forming some stony butte in the centre. In fact anyone who runs short of an occupation makes use of his spare time "pickin' stanes." Not long since one of the bachelors of this neighborhood, and there are many, stayed home from a dance because, having hired all the schoolboys in the district to pick stones for him on the following day he feared lest he should be incapacitated for the event. Which leads one to the conclusion that either the boys needed energetic urging (like all other boys) or else there were a goodly number of rocks on his chosen section. This part of the country boasts only two good crops in ten years, yet every spring the soil is upturned with new hope.

"No wonder then that the advent of the 'Rainmaker' was hailed with much joy. This remarkable personage, arriving from the States, presented to an audience gathered from many miles, some astonishing and heartening facts regarding the amount of rain he could produce. His method of procedure was unique. He would build a tower in a convenient spot on the dry belt, and according to local interpretation, "burst" the clouds, which thereupon would begin to "leak." This leaking process generally followed three days after the operation.

The Rainmaker had accomplished many and wonderful results in his past and was ready to favor the Dry Belt with an exhibition of his skill, guaranteed a sufficiently large sum. Why should not this novel scheme be tried out—we get all else by science, why not H. O.? So argued the inhabitants. But alas, funds were scarce and even

this wizard could not bring down the High Cost of Living, so the weary Dwellers of the Dry Belt had to resort to the old-fashioned method of praying, instead of paying, for rain.

The ancient method was effective, at any rate. One evening the serene old sky frowned mightily; from many doors issued tired figures that turned anxious faces to that welcome frown and announced: "It looks mighty cloudy—it might rain this time."

Blacker and blacker rolled the clouds together, and at last with all the vehemence that marks Alberta weather, be it wind or rain or shine, the deluge came! Down it poured, disdaining the gentle patter of milder skies and causing one big smile to spread all over the prairies, as fast as the newborn rivulets that leapt about. The roofs, that for ten months had not known moisture, leaked like sieves; and the old wire fence gates, that had been loose and inviting, tightened into straining fiends.

One would think such a long awaited event and such good prospects would put on the dwellers of the plains an everlasting smile, but it was not so. "Think of the start them weeds'll have now," was the representative remark of one chronic pessimist.

There is something indescribably appealing about a ride early some summer morn after one of these rains, when all the sky is dyed with pink and you and your horse canter alone, amid colors that no artist could create. The long-grassed sloughs tempt the nature-lover to pause a moment where the grass grows in every shade from dainty emerald to deep-toned olive, with here and there a glint of silver water shining through. Fringing its edges are hosts of little golden daisies huddled together in little Mennonite communities, and reminding one of the daffodils of Wordsworth fame. What would one not give for the tongue of a poet in such moments as these?

From the water rise five or six ducks with much fussing and squaking, among them a perturbed mother who hurries from her frightened brood to decoy away the intruder. The meadow-lark pipes up with his morning salutation: "Get up and get your sliker on," and a pair of long-legged curlews admonish in mournful plaint, "Hurry! Hurry!" from their flow flight above, alighting near by in their curious high-winged fashion. There is a snipe or two, a red-winged blackbird, and a curiously marked Crescent Bird wearing his black mourning necktie in complacent fashion. A rabbit, white breast in full view, eyes the intruder from a distance, then bounds out of sight; while hordes of bright-eyed gophers, like so many little grey stone pillars, sit up straight and watch, each at the mouth of his hole, and ready at the least provocation to give a saucy tweak of the tail and disappear.

Each season brings its seasonable flowers, from the dainty purple anemone of the early spring to the bold yellow golden-rod of the late fall. On seeing these wild gardens for the first time one is struck by the fact that the predominating colors of the flowers are purple and yellow, a truly royal combination. Intermingled with these are the coquettish little Bluebird's Eyes, the Bluebells, the white Mayflowers and Daisies, the pretty sweet-smelling pink Prairie Roses, the peculiar Tomato Plants with their flowers of tomato hue, the cerise Cactus flowers that show up at great distances, and their big golden sisters, resembling yellow roses. Then there are the whimsical Painted Cups, like lovely crimson cups of cream, that are tempting in their never-filled promises to blossom further.

Striking off the prairie to the river bed, where the Red Deer flows in horseshoe course about this plain, one finds the opposite in scenery. The river banks, shaded with trees, lie amid a deep coulee of rock, worn into grotesque figures of all descriptions. Every



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