

THE SMOKY YEARS

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INSTALLMENT I CHAPTER I

This was the crisis—the climax of all that long war. Here they sat, these men who had fought a common enemy for so long: Dusty King, who, with the hoofs of countless cattle, had carved many a Great Plains trail deep into the short grass; young Bill Roper, who had begun following those trails with Dusty King before he was big enough to hold a horse; and old Lew Gordon, Texas man, whose wild marketless herds had been the roots of fortune.

Dusty King and Lew Gordon constituted King-Gordon, the famous partnership that had developed with the great cattle trails; until now their many brands marked far-scattered herds beyond estimate. They were here because of tomorrow's auction of land leases. Under the hammer would go the grazing rights on the Crying Wolf Indian lands—those miles and miles of stirrup-deep grass that King-Gordon wanted, and that Ben Thorpe had to have.

It was curious that their long war with Ben Thorpe should have met its true climax here. The three in this room understood that the outcome would rest upon what the two older men decided here. Possession of the Crying Wolf meant dominance in the north to King-Gordon, or to Ben Thorpe; there was no longer going to be room for both.

"This is an old fight, Lew," Dusty King said. "It goes back as far as that first time you backed me with a little herd, to see if I could make it through to Abilene. Don't hardly seem like we better draw back now."

Lew Gordon stirred, swaying his shoulders imperceptibly, like a stubborn bear. "Credit's going to be terrible hard, this coming year," he said at last.

Dusty King seemed to sprawl a little more loosely; he was playing poker in a way of his own. Swaggering, easy-going, spendthrift—he still was a man who believed invincibly in himself.

"I passed Ben Thorpe in the road, t'rday," he said. "He was looking mighty prosperous. I bet he weighs two hundred and twenty-five pounds now, with his stomach pulled in."

"His backing is terrible strong," Lew Gordon said, his eyes on the floor.

No one knew better than Lew Gordon that Dusty King, in tackling the impossible a hundred times, had a hundred times shown the way for the rest. But Gordon remembered too the poverty of the cattle-poor days before any outlet was found for Texas beef. To risk all they had won, in a single slashing stroke at an old enemy, was almost more than Gordon could bear.

"You know why Ben Thorpe's strong," Dusty King said. "And you know how he got his start. We know why it is that so many Texas outfits stand in Ben Thorpe's name; and how many different ways he's found to jump down on little lonely Texan cowmen and leave them broke or dead. And we know what's happened to many a little outfit that started north, but never brought their cattle through, nor got home."

"Every year," Dusty King said, "since we began driving up the big trails, we've locked horns in one way or another with this one gang. I'm not forgetting who started the Red Crick stampede where Dave and Bob Henry died under piled up cattle; nor the Tularosa shootings, with four more of my boys dead. There's some good cowboys under the prairie, Lew."

Gordon said almost inaudibly, "Never could prove anything."

"His herds have grown faster than ours have grown," Dusty King's expressionless voice droned on. "He's as big as we are; he'll be bigger soon. From the Big Bend to the Tetons, he owns more outfits than he knows the names of. He's never run an honest deal where he could run a crooked one, nor a square trick where he could play a mean one; it's a long time since he rode all night with his rifle in his hands, but Lew, if he isn't stopped—there's plenty he can hire to do his dark-of-the-moon stuff now."

"Dusty," Lew Gordon said, "we've blocked him every way we could."

"That's why he'll get you, and me too, in the end."

Again the silence closed, with behind it the perpetual bawling of the cattle, far off in the spring night.

Dusty King said casually, "Cleve Tanner's here."

Bill Roper saw Lew Gordon's eyes flick up to look at Dusty King. "Cleve Tanner?"

"Here in Ogallala."

"What the devil's the meaning of that?"

"Cleve and Walk Lasham are the only two of Ben Thorpe's men that

raided the cross timbers with him in the old days; the only two he can really trust, now."

"It's natural that Walk Lasham should be here," Lew Gordon conceded; "but Cleve Tanner, all the way up from the Big Bend—"

"Shows you," Dusty King said, "what store they set on the Crying Wolf lands. Ben Thorpe is sold mighty deep into next year's deliveries. Already he's committed for more northern-fed cattle than he can show—unless he can get the Crying Wolf."

Slowly Lew Gordon got a frayed tally book out of his back pocket. "The survey—" Lew Gordon's voice was curiously bewildered—"it's hard to believe there's any land as good as this."

Their private survey had been made by Bill Roper; it represented weeks of hard riding, and shrewd calculation of the strength and depth of the feed upon the surface of the broken land.

"One place here reads fifty head to the section," Lew said wonderingly. "Fifty head of cattle grazing



"Maybe thirty-five cents an acre."

one section of land! It's past belief."

"This isn't Texas, Lew."

"I figure we might pay as high as thirty cents to the acre," Gordon said, "by the year's lease."

A flicker like that of heat lightning showed for a moment behind Dusty King's eyes; but his voice was low and monotonous as before. "Thirty cents be damned," he said.

Lew Gordon looked at him for a long time. How deep you figure to go?"

"Get the land," Dusty King said. "Ben Thorpe is liable to go crazy and bid his head off."

"We're looking down his throat," King said for the second time. "The least the deputy commissioner can accept is drafts on Kansas City. Ben Thorpe hasn't realized the value of the land. We'll catch him short and force him off the board."

"At what cost to ourselves?" Gordon demanded.

"At all costs."

Slowly Lew Gordon shook his head. "Maybe thirty-five cents an acre."

Dusty King's voice rose explosively for the first time. "Thirty-five cents," he echoed—"or fifty cents, or seventy-five, or a dollar! Get the land!"

Lew Gordon sighed, and he looked like a man who was weary and old. "You want that land," Gordon said, "even if—"

"At all costs," Dusty King said again.

Gordon looked his partner in the eyes.

"Go in and bid!"

Swinging down the board walks of Ogallala in the cool spring sunlight, Dusty King and Bill Roper looked a whole lot alike. The more than twenty years difference in their ages had not changed Dusty King's loose-jointed swagger, the rakish cock of his old soft hat, nor the cracking ring of the spurs he was believed to sleep in.

The trail years had leathened his face, but they could not diminish his gay exuberance; just as prosperity was unable to take from him the look of the trail. Whatever Dusty King wore, he always appeared to be wearing reputable saddle clothes.

Perhaps young Bill Roper had picked up a lot of Dusty King's characteristics in the course of an association that had lasted almost as long as Bill Roper's life.

Everybody who knew King-Gordon at all knew the story of Bill Roper and Dusty King. Fifteen years ago, at the age of five, Bill Roper had been found hiding in the brush, like a little rabbit, beside a wrecked outfit on the old trail to Sedalia. It was Dusty King who had found him there; and it was Dusty King who had buried the bullet-shattered body of Bill's father beside that God-forsaken trail.

In the fifteen years since then, Bill Roper had learned guns and horses and cattle, and the tricks of the trail as only Dusty King knew them. He had been able to read prairie signs before he could read print, and if it had not been for tomato can labels, perhaps would never have learned to read print at all. Everything he knew he had learned with Dusty King. There was every reason that he should have grown to look something like the great trail driver who had brought him up.

Now, as they made their way down the muddy street, before the false-fronted wooden buildings, half the cowmen that thronged Ogallala hailed Dusty with comradeship and delight; so that his progress was that of a celebrated character, already famous. The other half—they were Ben Thorpe men—seemed not to see him at all. It was hard to tell which tickled Dusty King more—the warmth of his many friends, or the bitterness of his innumerable enemies.

The bidding for the Crying Wolf lands was being held in a disused store, and here the sidewalk and half the street were filled with knotted groups. Through this crowd Dusty King and Bill Roper waded, Dusty trying to look like something bewildered, from the tall country. Beside the door was posted a handbill in black type, giving due legal notice of the auction of leases, and Dusty stopped to study this with a grave empty face, as if he had never heard of it before.

"Mr. King," somebody said, "they've been waiting for you, fully an hour."

Dusty looked blank. Then he clutched his hat to his head in a startled way, and rushed inside with a clownish representation of haste.

Within, the crowd of plains-country men—bronzed men, saddle-faced men, sometimes bearded men—gave way as King, followed by Bill Roper, shouldered his way to the back.

"Is this the place," King asked, "where the feller is selling the horse?"

The deputy commissioner took his feet off his table. "The sale was supposed to start at two o'clock," he complained.

A little tribute, there. The commissioner—perhaps already in Ben Thorpe's pay—hardly dared start an important sale, without present this slouching, nondescript-looking representative of King-Gordon.

"No word has come from your partner at all," the commissioner said.

"He ain't coming."

Three men who sat in chairs grouped around one end of the table looked at each other. They ignored King and Roper, as hostile dogs ignore an enemy of whom they are not yet keenly aware.

The big man in the light-colored hat was Ben Thorpe—the Ben Thorpe whose far-scattered holdings perhaps already exceeded those of King-Gordon. Thick-shouldered now, heavy-bodied, he was today more than ever a power feared in the cattle country—still unscrupulous, still menacing, but now of a different sort—a power of wealth, of organization, and of bought-up law.

Beside him, the tall man, lean and narrow-bodied as a slat, was Cleve Tanner; a hawk-faced man, keen-eyed, so cleanly shaven that the tight skin of his jaws seemed to shine. Cleve Tanner was manager of Ben Thorpe's Texas holdings, the breeding grounds from which Thorpe's whole organization drew its strength.

The other, the man who seemed uncommonly dark, even among these sun-darkened men, was Walk Lasham. He was Ben Thorpe's manager in the north, now; under his poker-faced watchfulness lay Ben Thorpe's northern holdings, the feeding grounds now necessary to any wide operation in the cattle trade.

The deputy commissioner raised his voice. "This," he said, "is a federal auction, to place by public bidding certain lands in the charge of the Indian Department, by the authority of the Secretary of the Interior and the President of the United States; namely certain lands . . ."

He droned through his preamble perfunctorily; everyone in the crowd knew exactly what was involved. Something more than land was here changing hands. To hold the Crying Wolf would all but mean supremacy in the north. But this thing was bigger than that. The two organizations which here clashed again were the great powers of the trails; behind each of them were whole coun-

ties of Texas mesquite grass plains, great areas of the middle short-grass country, scores of outfits. The struggle between them had developed on the Chisholm trail itself—a decade-long combat between men of diametrically opposed principles and methods. And now—

"This land," the deputy commissioner concluded, "is thrown into blocks. I think, gentlemen, you are already familiar with the placement of the lands. Block I includes, as previously agreed, an estimated one hundred sections, or sixty-four thousand acres, known hereinafter as 'Block I'; bounded on the north by—"

Cleve Tanner leaned close to Ben Thorpe, whispered, and Thorpe nodded.

"I shouldn't think," said the deputy commissioner, "we need hear any bid of less than ten cents per year, per acre."

There was a moment's silence, and the deputy commissioner got out a big silk handkerchief and mopped his head, as King now let a slow smile come to the surface of his impassive face. A curious rumble ran over the room, and the crowd seemed to sway.

"I got a proposition," Dusty King said. "Nobody is bidding on this land but just us two; nobody means to bid. Throw the whole thing in one pot and we'll bid on the works."

"I'll agree to that," Thorpe decided. The black anger in his face had submerged again, so that he was poker-eyed.

The deputy commissioner was beginning to look like a man who wished he were some place else. "If there are no objections—"

"Fifty cents," said Dusty King. Ben Thorpe's face had turned a curious color, not gray, certainly not bloodless; an odd congested color, like dark sand. "Fifty-five," he said.

"Sixty"

"Sixty-five."

"A dollar," said Dusty King.

"A dollar, five."

"Just in confidence between you and me," Dusty King said; "Mr. Thorpe can't pay that."

"I think my name is good anywhere in the cow country," Thorpe said to the commissioner.

"It ain't good here," said King. The deputy commissioner slapped his pen down on the table. "Gentlemen," he said, "I'm sorry to do this; but in the interests of the government, and of the Indian Department which I represent, all further bids in this auction will be accepted only as representing American gold."

"Cash on the nail?" King asked. "There was no question now about the sweat that stood out on the commissioner's forehead."

"Seventy cents," said King.

"I'm already bid a dollar, five!"

"Sure; but we got different rules now. God knows Thorpe can't back a dollar, five in gold. What kind of shenanigan is this, anyway?"

The eyes of the deputy commissioner went to Ben Thorpe's face again, but there was nothing to be read there. Thorpe seemed so lumpishly still that it was not apparent that he breathed.

"Seventy cents," said Dusty King again in the silence. "Whoop'er up, boys—I've only begun!"

Silence again through the pack of those saddle-faced men; perspiring silence on the part of the deputy commissioner, dead lumpish silence on the part of Ben Thorpe. Cleve Tanner, his hands locked back of his neck, looked at the ceiling; Walk Lasham sat motionless, his eyes on the face of his boss.

"You—" the deputy commissioner wavered, "you—you can back this bid in gold?"

"Immediate delivery by Wells Fargo," King said. "Right now, in Ogallala."

"Mr. Thorpe," the commissioner wavered, "Mr. Thorpe, will you—do you—"

They waited for what Ben Thorpe would say. His face was expressionless still, as he got up from his chair; but men stumbled over each other to get out of his way, as he walked down the length of that packed room, and out into the street.

The deputy commissioner seemed melted down, unrecognizable now as the crisp little man who had opened the bidding. His face was white and set, and his eyes showed fear.

"Well?" said King.

"The Crying Wolf," the commissioner said huskily, "the Crying Wolf lands—if—if there are no other bids—go to King-Gordon . . ."

Something like a sigh, a general release of tension, ran through that jam of men.

Close to Dusty King's ear Bill Roper asked, out of the side of his mouth, "How high would we—how high could we have gone?"

The mask of Dusty King's face broke up; every muscle in his face came into action, every tooth showed as he grinned.

"Seventy cents," King answered him.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Gems of Thought

To JUDGE human nature rightly, a man may sometimes have a very small experience, provided he has a very large heart.—Bulwer-Lytton.

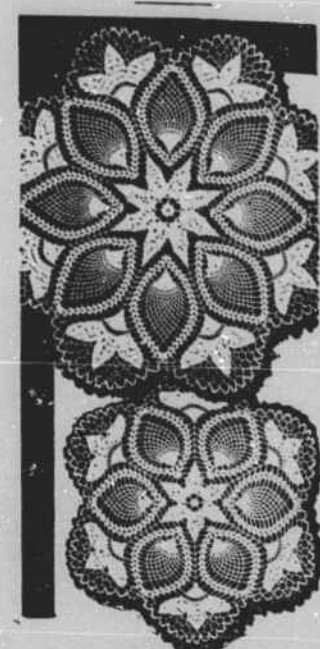
The greater the obstacle the more glory in overcoming it.—Moliere.

But curb thou the high spirit in thy breast.
For gentle ways are the best.
—Homer.

When people complain of life, it is almost always because they have asked impossible things from it.—Ernest Renan.

I am a man, and nothing in man's lot can be indifferent to me.—Terence.

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