

THE SMOKY YEARS

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INSTALLMENT 9

THE STORY SO FAR:

Dusty King and Lew Gordon had built up a vast string of ranches in the West. King was killed by his powerful and unscrupulous competitor, Ben Thorpe. Bill Roper, King's adopted son, was determined to avenge his death in spite of opposition by his sweetheart, Jody Gordon, and her father. Roper's successful raids against Thorpe's Texas holdings wiped him out of the state. When Roper visited Jody one night, she almost contemptuously called him a cattle thief and gunman. His determination unchanged, he now turned his attention toward Thorpe's ranches in Montana. Jody was secretly visited one night by Shoshone Wilce, one of Roper's men, who warned that her father's life was in grave danger.

CHAPTER XII—Continued

Jody Gordon's eyes had darkened in the dusk, making her face seem very pale. "What do you want me to do?"

Shoshone Wilce shrugged. "That ain't hardly up to me, Miss Gordon. But I'll tell you this: many's the time I've seen your father go stomping down the board walk right here in Ogallala, alone, and not even armed. That won't do, Miss Gordon. If I was in your place, I wouldn't never let him cut of the house without his gunbelt is strapped on, and the iron free in its leather. And wherever he goes, there ought to be three or four good hard-shooting cowboys with him; because, if I know Ben Thorpe, he isn't going into any gunfight alone!"

Jody peered at him intently. "What made you bring this word to me?"

"I'm a Bill Roper man," Shoshone Wilce said. "God knows, Miss Gordon, stringing with Bill Roper has never done anything for me. But—well, I just thought Bill Roper would want you to know. I kind of got the idea he thinks a heap of you, Miss Gordon."

And now another pony came slashing up to the corral. One of the loading foremen had come in.

"I got to be getting along," Shoshone Wilce said quickly.

She turned away, but instantly turned back again, and gripped Shoshone's arm just as he was sliding out of sight.

"Stay around," she ordered him. "Stay here until—"

"Miss Gordon," came the quick whisper, "I've got to get on to Miles City. I—"

"I thought so. Bill Roper's somewhere up there, isn't he? Yes, well, I'm going to join my father there—I'll ride with you in the morning." "Four hundred miles! And no coach until—"

"Don't worry about that. It takes saddle ponies to make time."

"But—I'm afraid your Paw might think—"

"I don't know how Bill Roper ever used you," Jody said with contempt. Shoshone winced. "I—I'll be around."

He faded into the shadows as Jody walked out of the stable, her eyes hard and bright in the dusk.

CHAPTER XIII

Bill Roper sat alone at a rear table in the Palace Bar, in Miles City—the young, turbulent center of a vast, raw range, the possibilities of which were still unknown.

For three months Roper had ridden through the bitter Montana winter. It had been no trouble for him to sweep together a dozen malcontent cowboys who hated Lasham or Thorpe, or both. Already they knew Bill Roper's name.

Against their common enemy these youngsters could be led, wild, reckless and crazy for raid; and Roper had led them as Texas had taught him.

His new northern wild bunch faced conditions in many ways bitterly adverse. Here in the north were no ousted cattlemen, no established population to which he could look for help. The Canadian border was far away, and no market awaited the hard-pushed herds on the other side.

What Montana had that Texas did not have was a concentration of Indian tribes, principally Sioux and Cheyenne, deprived of their hunting grounds, and dependent for food upon beef which the government was pledged to supply. It was to this circumstance that Roper had turned.

The giant beef contracts which the government threw upon the market had inevitably attracted more than one kind of graft. The result was famine—pitiful, relentless. Starvation stalked through the lodges of the Sioux, the Cheyenne, the Crow—and with it, Roper's opportunity.

Scouring the country, Roper turned up four Indian agents who were already badly scared. They had overplayed their hands, and were now faced with a loss of life among their charges about which they could do nothing without re-

vealing their own corrupt inefficiency. These men had connived with Lasham in bringing about a condition of tribal starvation; they were willing to connive with Bill Roper to cover up their position in any way they could.

By delivering beef to the reservations under these highly irregular conditions, Roper's wild bunch could little more than make expenses. But the advantage was this—a beef herd delivered to an Indian tribe disappeared over night, leaving little trace. A thousand hands skinned out the beef, destroying the portions of the hides containing the brands.

Constantly changing horses, perpetually in the saddle, Roper's saddle hawks swung across Montana. They first struck at Muddy Bend, picking up four hundred head of steers in the breaks of the Yellowstone. Three days' hard driving delivered these to a village of Assiniboine. Only four days later they were on the flats of the Little Thunder, far away. Here, struggling through a soft blinding snow, they ran off five hundred head, and a few days later three hundred more. They



They first struck at Muddy Bend.

Christmased in company with a herd of lifted steers somewhere between Three Sleep and the Little Powder; and New Year's found them sifting the pick of Lasham's cattle out of his Lost Soldier range.

By the end of January they had moved three thousand head—the very cream of the wintering stock. Repeatedly they had driven cattle incredible distances in impossible time.

Yet he knew his work had only begun. All their hard riding would fail of effect unless he could strike such a smashing blow as would cause a split between Lasham and Ben Thorpe.

And Roper had a plan—rash in scope and method, but savage in effect if it could be fulfilled. Already he had enough riders in sight to strike this last desperate blow. But the men available to his purpose were wild-eyed fighting kids who could not be driven and could scarcely be led; Roper could not captain his campaign alone. So now he fretted in Miles City, seeking three or four outlaw leaders who would make his preparations complete.

Now one of the dance hall girls came to his table, slipping uninvited into a chair. This was a girl whose attention bothered and embarrassed Roper every time he came here. Her name was Marquita.

She spoke to him now in a quiet, lifeless voice. "Why don't you like me?"

"I like you all right," he said.

"No, you don't. You don't even see me at all."

He noticed now that she looked different tonight; and after a moment he recognized that this was because there was no paint on her face. That would be because he disliked paint—though he had no idea how she had found that out. Her washed face was a perfectly symmetrical oval set with black eyes a little slanted, and her black hair, parted in the middle, was drawn back severely, in the fashion of the mestizo girls of the Texas border.

She leaned toward him now, and spoke rapidly, her voice low and compelling. "Listen—I hate Walk Lasham, too."

"Listen," she insisted. "You have to listen to me. Walk Lasham's in town. He came in this afternoon."

So, Roper thought, the time had come to move on again, with his work undone. He didn't like it, much.

"Well, thanks," he said; "I'm glad to know."

"He knows you're here—and what you're here for."

"I suppose he does," Roper said. "You're waiting here for Lasham," she accused him. "You know he'll come here. You're going to try shooting it out—"

Roper shrugged and was silent.

"Bill, it's hopeless! Walk Lasham is the fastest gunfighter in the north!"

Roper shrugged again. "Walk wants no fight with me."

"You're going to force the fight yourself! That's what you've been waiting here for, ever since you came to Miles City. Any moment Lasham may walk in that door—"

Marquita sat staring at him hopelessly, in her eyes a fixity of devotion which his taciturnity seemed to increase. Against his will he was becoming something that was happening to Marquita.

He remained silent; and, in a little while, she went away.

An hour passed, while Roper, drinking slowly, played his solitaire and watched the door.

Then suddenly Marquita was back. She came behind his chair to speak close to his ear in a panicky whisper. "He's coming! He's coming along the walk—"

"All right."

"Walk has two of his men with him," she said rapidly. "You haven't a chance, not a ghost of a chance. I can't bear to see you killed! I know you don't care anything about me. If you did I'd go anywhere in the world with you. But now you have to come out of here—quick—by the back way. I'll do anything—"

Suddenly she whimpered. Bill Roper saw that three men had come into the front of the Palace Bar.

The first of the three, a dark, lean man with wide, bowed shoulders, was Walk Lasham.

Marquita caught Bill's head in her arms, forced up his chin, and kissed him. He was surprised at the unexpected softness of her lips, hot against his mouth. Then abruptly Marquita stooped, and as she sprang away from him he felt the weight of his gunbelt ease. She slung over her shoulder, "It's for your own sake!" Her face was white.

He half started up, in instant anger, but the girl was running down the room. He saw her put something under the bar, and he knew it was his gun.

Roper rang his whiskey glass upon the table, trying to catch a bartender's eye. If Lasham had not seen what the girl had done, one of them could bring him his gun before it was too late. But the bar was thronged; the bartenders were working fast, in the thick of the evening rush.

The bar-flies had made room for Walk Lasham at the end of the bar, and Lasham and his two cowboys had their heads together now, consulting.

One of the cowboys, a man with a scar across his face that distorted his mouth in the manner of a hare lip, went quickly behind the bar, hunted beneath it, and returned to Walk. Roper saw Lasham's long face set. He said to himself, "Walk knows . . ."

Walk Lasham was fiddling with his empty glass on the bar, and the scar-mouthed man was watching Roper covertly with one eye from under the brim of his hat. Lasham reached for a bottle, filled his glass, tossed it off. Then he turned squarely toward Roper, and came walking back through the big room.

Roper played his cards, his hands visible upon the table. It seemed to take Lasham a long time to walk the length of the room. Roper glanced at the lookout chair, where a salaried gun-fighter usually sat. It was empty now.

Walk Lasham was standing in front of him.

"So you," he said, "are the tough gunman that killed Cleve Tanner." Bill Roper raised his eyes to Walk Lasham's face. "And you," he said, "are one of the dirty cowards that murdered Dusty King."

A hush had fallen upon the room, unbroken by the clink of a glass or the rattle of a chip. Lasham and Roper looked at each other through a moment of silence.

He dropped his eyes to Roper's hands, and his own right hand started a tentative movement toward the butt of his gun. His spread fingers shook a little as his hand crept down. But he was grinning now, sure of his ground.

"Looks a little different to you now, huh?"

"A coyote always looks like a coyote to me."

The smile dropped from Lasham's face. "I'm going to give you every chance," he said. His voice swung in even rhythms, low and sing-song. "I'm going to count five. Draw and fire any time you want to; because on five I'm going to kill you where you sit."

"I don't think you are." "One; two—" Lasham said. (TO BE CONTINUED)

Smile Awhile

Not That

"What do you mean by telling people that I was deaf and dumb?"

"I didn't say deaf."

When a man marries, says a writer, he comes to the end of his troubles. He didn't say which end.

Would Risk It

"You'd faint if I told you what she said about her husband!"

"Go on! I've got my smelling salts in my bag."

ALL OUT



He—I understand you go in for outdoor sports of all kinds. She—Go in? Certainly not, I go out for outdoor sports.

Trim and Song

He was a good barber, but his spelling was unsound. On the wall of his shop was a card bearing the words: "Hair, Cutting, 35 cents; Singing, 50 cents."

In came Percival and spotted the card. "Short at the back and around the ears," he said, seating himself. "And you can give me a verse and chorus of 'Roll Out the Barrel.'"

No Danger There

Earth flew in all directions as the golf novice attempted to hit the ball. After many failures, he turned to the caddie and said:

"My word, the worms must think there's an earthquake on!"

"I dunno," replied the lad. "The worms are very cunning. I'll bet they are hiding under the ball for safety."

Frank Outlook

"I am sorry you are leaving us, Jane," said Mrs. Browne, "but, of course, if you are going to better yourself, I—"

"Oh, no, ma'am," replied the maid, "I'm going to be married."

The Will and the Way

"John," said the young mother, "I've decided on a name for baby. We will call her Imogen."

John was lost in thought for a few minutes. He did not like the name, but if he opposed it his wife would have her own way.

"That's nice," he said presently. "My first sweetheart was named Imogen, and she'll take it as a compliment."

"We will call her Mary, after my mother," was the stern reply.

Ready for Her

Two sweet young things were discussing affairs of the heart.

"So you've accepted Tom?" said one acidly. "I suppose he didn't happen to mention that he had previously proposed to me?"

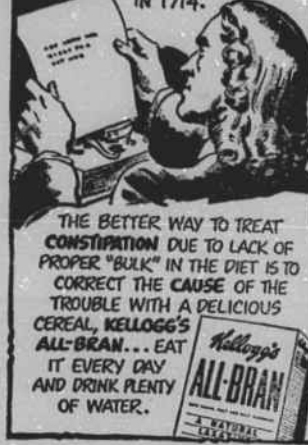
"Well, not exactly," replied the other blandly; "but he did confess that he'd done a lot of silly things before he met me."

A millionaire confessed recently that he is not interested in money. That's what Sonny says of the pudding, after his fourth helping.

WE FOUND A BETTER WAY

HENRY MILL

FOUND A BETTER WAY FOR SPEEDY WRITING. HE INVENTED THE FIRST TYPEWRITER IN 1714.



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First Step

One of the first steps to contentment and happiness is to learn not to begrudge other people the things they have because you cannot have them.



Wiser Daily I don't think much of a man who is not wiser today than he was yesterday.—Abraham Lincoln.

Add Vinegar to Kissing

Put a tablespoon of vinegar into water in which glasses are rinsed. It gives them a luster.

People Attending Movies

About 80,000,000 people attend motion picture shows each week in the United States.

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