

THE SMOKY YEARS

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INSTALLMENT 11 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 the opposition of his sweetheart, Jody Gordon, and her father. Daring raids upon Thorpe's Texas holdings wiped him out of the state. Roper then prepared for a great raid upon the vast herds on Thorpe's Montana ranches. Several thousand Indians had gathered near the Canadian border to take every beef that was driven across. Shoshone Wilce, one of Roper's men, told Jody that her father's life was in danger, so she rode to warn him. He was surprised to see her so far from home.

CHAPTER XV—Continued

When Lew Gordon spoke, his voice was so quiet that its very stillness carried threat of imminent destruction. "Bill Roper sent a man to you?"

"I didn't say that. He's a man who was with Bill Roper in the Texas Rustlers' War; he doesn't seem to be in the Montana raids."

"Who was it?" Lew Gordon rumbled. "What's his name?"

"Shoshone Wilce."

"Wilce! I know that name. I know it well. I'd rope and drag him in a second, if I caught him talking to you!"

"This man has talked with Ben Thorpe in Dodge," Jody told her father. "A lot of strange news is working down to Thorpe from up here in Montana. Some bands of rustlers are slashing up and down Montana throwing lead and leather into the Thorpe outfits under Lasham; they say he's badly hurt already—nobody will know how badly until the winter breaks."

Her father waited, his eyes angry. "The word from Dodge explains half the trouble that King-Gordon is up against," Jody said. "Thorpe can't believe that one lone cowboy, deserted by everyone who should have been his friend, could manage to smash his Texas holdings, and go on to cut away his herds in Montana. He thought that we were backing Billy Roper in the Texas Rustlers' War. And he believes that we're backing him now."

"Well?" Lew Gordon said. "You mean to say you came all this way to tell me that?"

"Ben Thorpe means to kill you." Lew Gordon's face showed no change of expression. But he did not reply at once.

"I don't doubt it," he said at last; "what would you expect? You bring war into a range and anybody is likely to go down."

Jody's face was white. "You know what's at the bottom of all the trouble we're having," her father said. "You know as well as I do that two years of nothing but trouble lays square at the door of Bill Roper."

Jody sprang up to face him. "I certainly do not know anything of the kind!" she answered him.

Lew Gordon stared at her. "It's an everlasting shame upon the cow country that Dusty King's killers are still in their saddles. I tell you, Billy Roper is the only man I've seen with courage enough to—"

And now her father angered as she had seldom seen him anger. "You'll tell me nothing!" he roared. "Roper! I'm sick of hearing his name—a dirty outlaw whelp that knows nothing but kill and burn and raid!"

Jody's eyes narrowed and filled with tears. "You may as well know this," she told her father. "The day that Billy Roper dies I want to die too."

For a moment Lew Gordon seemed bewildered; he stared at his daughter as if the devil had come up through the floor. The girl who faced him was entirely strange to him.

He heard her say, "If you had stayed by him, as Dusty King would have done, Thorpe would have been whipped and through, long ago."

"Child," he said queerly, "what are you talking about?"

"If you'd only take Billy Roper back into King-Gordon—"

"That'll never happen while I live," her father said flatly.

A silence fell between them, presently broken by the girl. "He asked me to ride with him once, when he first took the outlaw trail. I wish I had. To the last day I live, I'll wish I'd ridden with him then. And now I'll tell you something more. If ever he asks me again, I'll go."

"By God," he said, his voice unsteady with the repression he put upon it, "that closes the deal! I've kept my riders off him because of Dusty King, and I let him run on and on, rousing up a range war that has close to busted King-Gordon. But when it comes to tampering with you—it's the end! I'm through!"

He caught up his battered sombrero, and his spurs rang as he turned toward the door.

"Dad, what are you going to do?" "Thorpe has a reward on Bill Roper's head. King-Gordon is going to double that reward."

He went storming out, his face black and violent with portent of war.

For several moments Jody Gordon stood motionless where he had left her. Then she turned and went out of the house to the long shed-like stable.

Shoshone Wilce was loitering there in the shadow of the rear wall, an uneasy and restless figure.

"Did you find out where Billy Roper can be reached?" Jody demanded.

"Yes, mam, I kind of did, I guess; and I got to be getting on there, Miss Gordon. If you'll just give me any message you want me to take, I'd sure like to be pulling out of here, before—"

"All right. You be here with two good horses just after dark."

"If you could just as leave give me the message now, I'd sure like to—"

"There is no message. I'm going with you to Bill Roper."

Shoshone Wilce looked like a man entrapped. "I can't do it! Your fa-



"I'd sure like to be pulling out of here, before—"

ther—I just won't do it, Miss Gordon!"

"All right. I'll make the ride by myself."

"Hey, look! You can't—"

"Bill Roper isn't going to like this, Wilce."

Shoshone studied her searchingly, but found nothing to reassure him. It was in his mind that this girl would do exactly as she said. "My life ain't worth a nickel, either way," he almost whimpered.

"You be here with the horses," Jody said.

She turned and went into the house, leaving Shoshone Wilce standing unhappy and uncertain, ankle deep in the wet snow.

CHAPTER XVI

The rounding up of the wild bunch of riders lost Roper a few days; but within the week Bill Roper and Tex Long rode into the plains of the Little Dry.

Here around a spluttering fire the riders crouched in their sodden blankets, like Indians, while Roper gave out his orders. Thirty-two men and six outlaw leaders were now in the field against Walk Lasham's powerful Montana outfits in the Great Raid.

It was Roper's plan that he and Tex Long, with twelve men between them, should make the most daring raid of all; a raid upon the big herds which Lasham held between the headwaters of Timber Creek and the Little Dry. Of all the ranges in which the wild bunch was interested, this was the nearest Miles City—the most accessible, the most closely watched, the best protected. How many cattle he could transfer from this range to the starving Canadian Sioux, Roper did not know; but it was his hope to raise such a conspicuous and stubborn disturbance as would mask the operations of the rest of the wild bunch, and permit Pierce to work unimpeded.

"The fourteen of us will split seven ways," Roper told them now. "I figure Lasham's look-out camp for this range is about twelve miles southeast. We'll comb every way but that way. I'm not telling you how to gather stock. Hunt 'em like you know how to hunt 'em. Move out one day's ride, spotting your cow bunches. Next day pick 'em

up and work 'em this way. And on the third day throw your gather against a coulee or something where one man can hold 'em, and the other man of each pair ride back and meet me here. I figure this range is heavy with cattle. I don't see any reason why two good men can't easy throw together three hundred head in a couple of days. That gives us a nice bunch of anyway two thousand. The more the better—but with two thousand we'll make our drive."

They slept that night under the slowly falling snow. Roper himself made coffee and routed out his riders two hours before the first light.

For two days Roper watched the enemy camp while the snow held on, piling a deeper and deeper mat; then on the third day he returned to the rendezvous as the roundup men began straggling in.

Tex Long was the first one back. "This range is plumb solid with stock," Tex declared. "How many head do you figure me and Kid Johnson scraped up, just us two?"

"Well," Roper grunted, "upwards of a dozen—I should hope."

"Better'n six hundred head! Lord Almighty, Bill! Figuring they're worth twenty dollars apiece, and allowing that all the other boys do as good, we're liable to get out of here with around eighty thousand dollars worth of cattle! You realize that?"

But Roper was thinking of the letter in his pocket; the appeal of a girl who needed him in some unknown way, and who did not even know why he couldn't come.

All the next day they worked to throw the little bunches together into a trail herd. Not all of them had done as well as Tex Long and Kid Johnson, but most of them had done well enough. And then, at last, the first herd privateered in the Great Raid began to roll. A long unsteadily moving river of cattle poured northward, a dark welter in the thinning fall of the snow. White-faces, mostly, blocky and heavy, well wintered on the prairie hay—Roper counted two thousand six hundred odd!

Pressed hard by the heavy force of cowboys, the cattle bawled but humped along northward into the valley of the Prairie Elk.

Rounding up within a day's ride of Miles City itself, Roper's men had taken this herd almost out of the very corrals of Lasham's outposts; and yet, so far as any of them knew, that swift-moving drive represented a harder blow than had ever been struck a cattleman in a single raid. In all their months of effort the winter wild bunch had been unable to achieve an equal reprisal upon Lasham, and now they could hardly believe their own success.

The cattle that broke the way through the snow kept dropping back, blown and tired; but as fast as they failed, others were forced forward to take their places. Long-horned, stag-legged steers of the old Texas strain fought the riders, breaking the heavy column repeatedly in their wild-eyed thrusts for liberty, and these were allowed to get away. Gaunt, weak cattle lagged back, unable to keep up even under the snapping rope ends of the tail riders; they also were allowed to drop out, promptly forgotten. Yet, in that first day, the side riders swept in enough north-roaming cattle to more than make up the loss.

Roper went with the herd as far as Circle Horse Creek; but when they had forded the shallows, crashing through the rotten ice, he turned back. With him he took four men who he believed would do what he said. The cattle were moving more slowly now, plodding doggedly through the heavy going; Tex Long and the remaining eight men could hold them to their way. What was needed now was work of a different kind, and Roper thought he knew how that was to be done.

It was his intention to fight a rear guard action—not only for this first herd, which would be delivered within the week to the Indians who would spirit it away, but for the protection of all the rest of the wild bunch raiding to westward.

But now as he neared the head of the Little Dry, a rider came dropping down a long slope upon a racing horse. His carbine was held above his ragged sombrero in sign of peace; and as he came near they saw that it was Hat Crick Tommy.

Roper jumped his horse out to meet Hat Crick. "What is it? Is there any word? Did she—"

Tommy's face was haggard with fatigue. "She's gone!" he jerked out. "She's been to Miles City—and now she's gone!"

"Gone? Gone where?"

"Nobody knows. She's missing—disappeared—strayed or lost or rustled, I don't know which! Her father's wild crazy, and every K-G outfit in the north is combing the trails—"

Roper sat staring for a full half minute. Then his hands fumbled for his reata, shook out the loop. "Turn that roan pony! I've got to have a fresh horse—"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

AROUND THE HOUSE

Vinegar added to dried glue will make it usable again.

Put a drop or two of oil or some soap on those squeaky door hinges.

Pongee must be dry when ironed. It will spot and streak if ironed when damp.

A serve yourself center piece for the table is a time saver. Gaily decorate a large platter of cold meat, salads and hard cooked eggs, with relishes, buttered bread slices and dabs of jelly or jam.

To get the best service from felt hats, brush them frequently with a soft brush (not a stiff whisk broom) with the grain of the felt.

Half a teaspoonful of soda added to boiling frosting will keep it from being runny.

Before tubbing a wash silk dress remove all buckles, buttons, bows and loose trimmings and wash them separately. If they're left on the dress they are likely to become damaged or they may tear the dress.

Waters of the Earth

Almost 72 per cent of the earth's surface is covered by water. The superficial area of the earth includes approximately 139,440,000 square miles of ocean and 57,510,000 square miles of land, on which there are approximately a million square miles of lake and river surface. It is estimated that the oceans of the earth contain 323,000,000 cubic miles of water. The deepest place is the Milwaukee Depth north of Puerto Rico, 30,246 feet. The average depth of the ocean below sea level is 12,450 feet, or about five times the average height of land above sea level.

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