

THE SMOKY YEARS

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INSTALLMENT 7 THE STORY SO FAR:

Dusty King and Lew Gordon had built up a vast string of ranches which stretched from Texas to Montana. King was killed by his powerful and unscrupulous competitor, Ben Thorpe. Bill Roper, King's adopted son, undertook to break Thorpe's power. His first step was to start a cattle war in Texas. He made this decision against the opposition of Lew Gordon and the tearful pleading of his sweetheart, Jody Gordon. With the aid of Dry Camp Pierce and other outlaw gunmen, Roper conducted raid after raid upon Thorpe's herds. Cleve Tanner, manager of Thorpe's Texas holdings, seemed helpless to stop him. In spite of his daring plans, Roper's resources had dwindled dangerously low by the time winter came. And Thorpe seemed not to feel the losses.

CHAPTER X

The winter dragged out slowly. Roper's plans, bold as they were, had been well laid. He had perceived from the first that success or failure depended upon whether or not he could make his war with Tanner self sustaining. To gnaw away at the Tanner herds was one thing; to turn their captures into cash was altogether another.

Roper had hoped that he could initiate his own drives to the north, but he had found this out of the question. On the other hand, the trail drivers had found themselves so vulnerable that none of them wanted to buy cattle of questionable ownership.

The Thorpe-Tanner organization did not have this problem; they took what they wanted and drove what they wanted, by means of their own trail outfits. But Roper could now only dispose of cattle for the trail through ranchers known to be scrupulous and established men.

This was the strategic purpose behind Roper's rehabilitation of the eleven outfits which Tanner had originally seized, and which Roper had now put back into the hands of their proper owners. These re-established ranchers had not only the sympathy but the respect of everyone who knew anything about Texas cattle. Through these men Roper now had a safe and sure outlet for the cattle recovered by Dry Camp's experts, while the gunfighters under such men as Nate Liggett, Tex Daniels, and Hat Crick Tommy supplied a much needed protection until they could get on their feet.

But this method, promising as it was, was slow. Of necessity the men whom Roper backed were cowmen without assets other than their disputed claim to their ground.

Sometimes by mortgage loans, but principally by silent partnerships, Roper had now obtained interests in nearly a dozen outfits. They should have been thriving outfits. But Roper found his money draining away with unforeseen swiftness, without hope of any financial return until the trail should open in the spring. Only the Mexican border operations, which depended upon Lee Harnish, continued to show a thin trickle of income through the winter months. As spring approached, Roper found himself near the end of his string.

Early in February, Shoshone Wilce came south seeking Bill Roper, and found him at the Pot Hook ranch.

"Find out anything?" Roper asked.

Shoshone Wilce rubbed his badly shaved chin with horny fingers. "I don't know as you're going to like this so very good, Bill."

"Let's have the bad news first—I eat it up."

"God knows there's enough of it; there ain't any other kind to be had. What do you want to know first?"

"How's Thorpe making out up above?"

"I saw him in Dodge City; he was throwing money around with a shovel in each hand. You know what I think? I think he can go away and forget Tanner, and write everything he has in Texas right off the books, and never know the difference!"

Roper locked his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. Sometimes it seemed to him that trying to break Tanner was like trying to empty the Rio Grande with a hand dipper. The apparently unbounded resources of Ben Thorpe in the middle country and in the north, out of reach of the south Texas war, made up a vast reservoir which Tanner could draw on without limit.

"How is Tanner himself making out?"

"Bill, I've been all up and down the north and east part of Texas; and I can't see where we've accomplished a damned thing."

"You don't know what you're talking about!"

"You know what I think?" Wilce persisted. "I think there's more cat-

tle in this country than the world has any use for. I don't think you can bother any man any more, just by fooling with his cattle."

"Never mind what you think. Let's have what you know."

"I nosed around and tried to find out what promises Tanner's been making for cattle on spring deliveries. I didn't learn everything. Nobody learns everything. But I got enough to total up."

Shoshone Wilce hesitated, and didn't say any more until he had got a cigarette rolled. In the middle of rolling his cigarette he went into a coughing fit, and spilled the tobacco, so that he had to start over again.

"Bill," he said at last, "Cleve Tanner's going to drive more cattle this year than he's ever drove before. In just one bunch alone he aims to deliver fifteen thousand head on the banks of the Red!"

"He's crazy!" Roper shouted. "He can't do it—it's impossible!"

"Well—he thinks he can. He knows his cattle counts better than me. But—I've been all up and down this country, and I don't see but what he can."

"Well, anyway," Roper said, "the border gangs are going good. We'll go on with it, and keep going on..."

"Bill," Shoshone said, "how long can you go on, the way it's costing you now?"

"Not much farther, I guess."

"You going to have to quit?"

Roper shook his head. "I'll never quit now, Shoshone; I can't quit."



Harnish took to the brush and the hills.

While I've got one rider left with me, or no riders, I'll still be working on Cleve Tanner. But I think we're going to beat him, Wilce. After all, the border gangs—we can count on them."

Roper continued to count on his border gangs for two weeks more. Then, in the middle of February, he learned that Lee Harnish was through.

The first word of difficulty came when Dave Shannon pushed a little bunch of seven hundred head through the river at Mudcat Turn, and found no vaqueros waiting on the other side. Shannon waited three days before he was forced to turn the cattle free and ride.

The complete news of what had happened never really came. What Roper learned came in bit by bit, by way of random riders who had talked with a vaquero here, another there.

Lee Harnish had been pressing south with a herd of twelve hundred head. He was two days into Mexico, and supposed that he was clear; he had never had much trouble, once he was well below the line. But now, one moonless night, a band reported as of at least sixty men struck from no place, scattering the herd, and blazing down on Harnish's riders almost before they could take to the saddle. There had been a sharp running fight as Harnish and his half-dozen boys took to the brush and the hills. Unsatisfied with seizure of the herd, the unknown band had spent three days trying to hunt down Harnish's riders.

Lee Harnish himself, wounded in the first skirmish, had had a hard time getting clear; it was not known whether or not all of his riders were elsewhere accounted for.

After an elapse of several weeks, an Indian-faced vaquero came hunting Bill Roper; he carried a written message from Lee Harnish:

"This thing is finished up. Don't let anybody tell you it was Cleve Tanner's men busted into us. What

hes done, this Tanner has put some bunches of Mex renegades up to landing on us, they work with the Yakis, and his Indian scouts have spotted where we make our crossings. Seems like there's anyway a dozen bands of them haven't got anything else to do but lay watching those crossings, and wait us out.

"About half of them is carrying new American guns and plenty ammunition. They got our hide nailed to the fence all right and we are through."

It was a long time before Roper saw Lee Harnish again. He did not accept Harnish's statements off-hand; but when he had conferred with Dave Shannon, and others of the border men in whom he believed, he was forced to accede that the border-running phase of the attack on Tanner was done.

As February drew to a close, the big herds were once more being thrown together for the trail.

It was deep into March when Tex Long quit.

"Look," Tex Long said, "look." He did not talk easily; whatever he said was matter-of-fact, even now. "I got to pull out of this game."

Bill Roper looked at him, without expression. "All right. How much you figure I owe you?"

Tex smiled. "Nothing."

A very rare flush of anger came into Bill Roper's face. "Tex, what's the matter with you?"

Tex Long made a quick, futile gesture with his hands. "We used to be able to jump down on them. We can't do that now. The Bert Johnson place is studded with rifles until a man can't take a step. Every place you'll find out it's the same. There isn't going to be anything more we can do. We went good for a while. But they got organized, now. We're through."

Tex Long was only one of Bill Roper's picked gunfighters, but he was one of the best. As March drew on, Roper lost four more.

Into the Big Bend, into the valley of the Nueces, Cleve Tanner had flooded such a power of gunfighters as Bill Roper would not have believed. He had supposed that he could outpace and outsmart Tanner's warrior outfits. But now his raiding forces met everywhere a stubborn resistance.

Roper had discounted the quit of Tex Long; but now other news was coming in. The Graham outfit—the first of all those that the Roper men had taken—was again in the hands of Cleve Tanner; and Nate Liggett, assigned to protect Graham, had headed for the tall without even a report. Hat Crick Tommy was three weeks missing. The Davis outfit, left under his protection, had gone the way of all loose outfits, and Tanner's cowboys rode the range.

Dry Camp Pierce was almost the last to come in—of those who came in at all.

Pierce rode into the Pot Hook Camp early in April. He was the same, small wiry man he always had been—his eyes watery, his jaws poorly shaven.

"Bill, I can't carry these camps no more. God knows we strung with you while we could. We've et beef, beef, beef without salt or flour, we've et bobcat meat. But Bill, there's no lead in our guns, and there's no patches in our pants, and it's time I got to let the boys go, to make out any way they can."

Bill Roper looked older than Dusty King had ever looked; his face was like granite, with hard lines cut into it by the weather.

"Okay," he said. "I understand how you feel, Dry Camp."

"Look you here," Dry Camp said. "I've strung with you when I wouldn't have strung with any other man, let alone an upstart kid. I'll say this for you—you've made a game fight. But kid, take my word for it—they're too big, and they're too strong."

"You think so?" Bill Roper said. "I know so. I don't know what you had, made men like Lee Harnish and Dave Shannon and Nate Liggett throw in with you, but they did—the damnedest wild bunch Texas ever seen. Half the renegades of the Long Trail, and your part of King-Gordon, has gone into beating Cleve Tanner. And where are we now?"

"Well?"

"We aren't any place! Kid, I tell you we're beat, and we're long beat!"

April melted into May, and Roper had nothing to fight with any more. Those units of his wild bunch that had not quit had not been heard from at all; he knew already that the ones who had completely failed. Cleve Tanner prospered, seemingly; and all was well with Ben Thorpe.

Bill Roper waited at the Pot Hook now, trying to think of some way that he had missed. King-Gordon denied him, and Lew Gordon expressly would advance nothing more against Dusty King's share of the partnership which had been broken by death.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Smile Awhile

Prelude
Wife—That boy of ours gets more like you every day.
Hubby—What's he been up to now?

The big difference between human and vegetable life is that in vegetation the sap rises.

No Sale
Lawyer—That'll be \$10, please.
Client—What for?
"My advice!"
"But I'm not taking it."

Why Tell It?
It was a very wet night when Jones knocked at the door of his friend Wats.
"Hallo!" exclaimed Wats. "I'm glad to see you. Come in!"
"I don't think I dare," Jones protested. "My feet are very dirty."
"That doesn't matter. Just keep your boots on."

Her Secret
"Why do they always call Nature 'she'?"
"Because no one knows how old she is."

Standard Time Zones

Officials of the large railroads in the United States met in 1883 to discover some method of establishing a time-system that could be universally adopted by all American railroads. Previously, all roads had used different systems.

The railroad men adopted a system based on the idea that 24 standard meridians should be established 15 degrees apart in longitude, starting from the meridian of Greenwich, England, and extending around the globe. An international conference on standard time, meeting in Washington in 1884, made the same recommendation to the countries represented. Since that time, the four time zones, Eastern, Central, Mountain and Pacific, have been used in this country.



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Happiness is watching others drink from springs which we have caused to rise in the desert.—B. H. Metson.

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