

THE SMOKY YEARS

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INSTALLMENT 8

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. The raids upon Thorpe's herds were successful at first, but resistance was soon put up which caused Roper's men to leave him, one by one. Cleve Tanner, manager of Thorpe's Texas holdings, appeared not to feel the losses inflicted upon him. Roper's resources were dwindling low, and he seemed doomed to failure.

CHAPTER X—Continued

Dry Camp Pierce still loafed at the Pot Hook, dejected, hopeless. No one knew what he was waiting for. Roper never heard from the rest of them now. In spite of everything that Maxim could do, the Rangers were on the loose. The wild bunch that had threatened to dominate Texas was broken and split, scattered far and wide, every man for himself. Day and night, a saddle pony waited beside the door of the bunkhouse in which Roper slept . . .

Now, unexpectedly, came Shoshone Wilce.

Nothing could tell more of Roper's present position than this:—as Shoshone Wilce rode up, Bill Roper already had his gun in his hand, and the other hand upon the bridle rein of his pony.

Shoshone Wilce almost tumbled into Bill Roper's arms. He grabbed Bill by both lapels of the black, town-going coat that Roper always wore when he was about to travel a long way. Shoshone's bottle-nose gleamed and quivered, and his eyes were like shoe buttons.

"It's done! He's bust—he's split—he's cracked!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Cleve Tanner! I tell you, he's gone to hell!"

Suddenly Bill Roper turned into the unaccountable kid that his years justified. Like a man suddenly coming alive, he took Shoshone by the throat and shook him.

He said, "Shoshone—you fool with me—"

Shoshone cried out through the grip on his throat, "I tell you, Cleve Tanner—"

He couldn't say any more. Bill Roper was cool again, now. "What makes you think so?"

"He failed his delivery at the Red. Where he was supposed to bring up fifteen thousand head, a little handful of punchers showed up with a few hundred. He can't round his cattle—if he's got any cattle—and he can't make delivery at the Red!"

"We didn't believe you," Shoshone Wilce babbled on. "We all said it couldn't be done. But by gosh, we've done it! All over Texas, Tanner's notes are being called, as the word spreads. Wells Fargo refuses to honor his signature for a dime. They say now that Ben Thorpe won't back Tanner—Thorpe denies him, and the Tanner holdings are being closed up and sold out—"

"You sure?" Roper asked, looking up from the ground again.

"Am I sure? You think I'd risk my damn throat coming here to tell you something like this, if I didn't know for sure?"

"No," Roper admitted, "I guess not."

"It's all over," Shoshone tried to tell him. "Can't you realize it, man?"

"No," Roper said.

CHAPTER XI

Strolling, easy-going, but somehow reluctant, Bill Roper walked the streets of Tascosa, between the false-fronted wooden buildings that lined the hoof-stirred dust.

Sooner or later, he knew, Cleve Tanner would appear upon this one main street. Everybody knew that Tanner was on the warpath, determined to seek out Bill Roper. It was said that Tanner's only remaining interest was to bring down the youngster who had cut Texas from under him.

Yet ten days passed before Cleve Tanner came.

It was eleven o'clock on a sunny Saturday morning when Dry Camp Pierce brought Bill the word.

"Well, kid, he's here. You were right again—you won't have to hunt him out. He's looking for you; all you have to do is wait."

"Where is he now?"

"In some bar, a block up the street. He's walking from bar to bar, asking if you've been seen. You might's well wait for him here."

"No," Roper said. "I'll walk out and meet him, I think."

Dry Camp peered up into his face. "Kid, you look sick!"

"I don't feel real happy," Roper admitted.

"Draw deliberate and slow," Pierce counseled. "Take your time,—don't hurry, whatever you do. But don't waste any time, either. Fast and smooth—"

"I get you," Roper said with a flicker of a grin. "Take my time, but be quick about it. Move plenty slow, but fast as hell. All right, Dry Camp!"

He gave the butt of his gun a hitch to make sure it was loose in its leather; then he spun the whiskey away from him untasted, and walked out.

Dry Camp Pierce looked at the full glass, and exchanged a worried glance with the bartender. Then he followed Bill.

Dry Camp kept blinking his eyes in the bright light, as if they were dry; and there were white patches at the corners of his mouth.

"Don't give him too much of a break, kid. He's awful bad. But you'll get him, all right," he added hastily.

Half a block ahead another man stepped into the street, and walked toward Bill. Before his face could be seen in the black shadow un-



Bill Roper holstered his own smoking forty-four.

der his hat, Bill Roper knew by the set of the broad shoulders, by the rolling swing of his stride, that it was Cleve.

The moments during which the two men walked toward each other drew out interminably. Their eyes were upon each other's faces now; Bill could see that Cleve Tanner looked happy, almost gay, as if this was the first good thing that had happened to him for a long time.

At twelve paces Cleve Tanner drew; to observers the men seemed so close together that it was impossible that either of them should live. Tanner's gun spoke five times, fast, faster than most men could slip the hammer. Nobody knew where the first four shots went; but the fifth shot was easy to place, for it blew a hole in the street as Tanner's gun stubbed into the dust.

Bill Roper holstered his own smoking forty-four. He had fired twice.

Dry Camp Pierce was at his elbow again. "Here's the horses. It's time to ride. By God, I knew you could take him, kid."

Roper was feeling deathly sick.

CHAPTER XII

It was well into the summer as Bill Roper once more rode south out of Ogallala toward the pile of stones that marked the grave of Dusty King. Jody Gordon rode with him. In the few days he had stopped over in Ogallala he had hardly seen her at all. At first she had refused to ride with him today; but at the last moment, as if on an impulse, she had changed her mind.

Roper, studying her sidelong, thought that Jody seemed to have aged several years in one. Impossible now to find any trace of the irrepressible, up-welling laughter that had been so characteristic of her a year before. Her eyes were unlighted, and a little tired-looking; her mouth was expressionless except for a faint droop at the corners, which suggested—perhaps resignation, perhaps a hidden bitterness.

She didn't have much to say; but finally she asked him, "What did my father decide?"

"He says now that I'll never have another penny out of Dusty King's share until—until he's able to dictate to me what I'm going to do with it; or, that's what it amounts to."

"But you'll go on, and throw yourself against Walk Lasham in Montana?"

"Yes; I have to go on." They were silent after that; and presently they sat, almost stirrup to stirrup, but somehow infinitely far apart.

For a little while he stood looking at the cross which he had made of railroad ties. He said, half aloud—"One down. Dusty . . ."

"I suppose," Jody said, "you'll be cutting a notch on the handle of your gun, now."

He was surprised to hear her say that. He had no way of knowing how much she had heard, or what she had heard, about his shoot-out with Cleve Tanner.

"A notch? I hadn't thought anything about it."

All her bitter contempt of the lonely riding men of violence came into her voice. "Isn't that what the gunmen and the cow thieves always do?"

He was motionless a long time. Then he drew the skinning knife that always swung at the back of his belt in a worn sheath. Its blade was lean and hollowed, worn almost out of existence by a thousand honings. He stood looking at the knife; he tossed it in the air, and caught it by the handle again.

"I wouldn't go cutting marks on the handle of a gun," he said at last. His voice was thick. "Nobody cares what anybody does to the handle of a gun."

Roper stepped forward, and with the keen blade cut a notch clean and deep in the left arm of Dusty's cross.

When he looked at Jody she was staring at him strangely, almost as if she were afraid.

All through the afternoon Jody Gordon had ridden the barren trails above Ogallala, on a pony that forever tried to turn home. Thaw was on the prairie again, and the South Platte was brimming with melted snow; in the air was something of the damp, clean smell which had marked another spring, in this same place. But it was now more than six months since Jody had seen Bill Roper; and she found it no help that she was forever hearing his name.

It was with reluctance that she at last rode up the rise upon which it stood, unlighted, in the dusk.

She unsaddled her own pony, booted it into the muddy corral, and threw the forty pound kak onto the saddle-pole with the easy, one-handed swing of the western rider. As she turned toward the house she was trying not to cry.

Then, as she walked through the stable, a figure rose up from the shadows beside the door and barred her way.

Jody Gordon's breath caught in her throat. She said, evenly, "Looking for someone, Bud?"

The spare-framed visitor took off his hat and held it uneasily in his two hands. "Well, I tell you, Miss Gordon—could I speak to you for just a minute? I'm a Bill Roper man."

Jody Gordon's heart jumped like a struck pony "Billy sent you to me?"

"I haven't seen Bill Roper. But—I've seen Ben Thorpe. Miss Gordon, tell me one thing: Is your father backing Bill Roper? I mean, is he backing this plowing into Ben Thorpe?"

"My father," Jody Gordon said, "has quit Bill Roper in every way he possibly could."

"That's what I thought," Shoshone Wilce said. "Only trouble is, people that don't know the difference, they don't none of them believe that any more."

Jody Gordon interrupted him sharply. "What's happened?"

"Miss Gordon, your father is in a terrible bad fix. I'm afraid—I'm afraid he's going to die before this thing is through."

"What do you mean?"

"Most people think Lew Gordon is backing Bill Roper—maybe you know that? Well, now there's a feller rode to Ben Thorpe from Miles City—a feller that was a foreman with Thorpe's Montana outfits under Walk Lasham. Maybe this feller had some kind of fight with Lasham—I don't know nothing about that. But this feller swears to Thorpe that Lasham is letting the Montana herds drain away to the Indians, and to the construction camps, and Ben Thorpe never seeing a penny of the money from beef or hide."

"What does Thorpe himself think?"

"Thorpe thinks your father has bought Walk Lasham. Just the same as he thought your father bought Cleve Tanner in Texas, until Bill Roper gunned Cleve down. And Thorpe is fit to be tied. A man like him—he's terrible dangerous always, Miss Gordon; but now he's ten times more dangerous than he ever was in his life."

"You mean you think Ben Thorpe will—will—"

"Miss Gordon, I know. Ben Thorpe is going to kill Lew Gordon, just as sure as—"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Smile Awhile

Unnatural
Doctor—What is your profession?
Patient (pompously)—I'm a gentleman.

"Well, we'll have to try something else. It doesn't seem to agree with you."

Pre-Staffed
They were just married and she had cooked her first chicken.

When he was about to carve it, he asked: "What did you stuff it with, dear?"
"It didn't require stuffing, darling," she replied. "It wasn't hollow."

IN THE DARK



Urma—Has Jack ever kissed you against your will?
Helen—No; but he thinks he has.

That Was Proper
Father and son were running a business.

"Bear in mind," said the father, "I am the main support of the firm."

"Right!" said the son. "You're on our billheads as 'J. Brown, Prop.'"

"Awfully decent of you to send us a check as a wedding present," said the bridegroom at the wedding reception, to his new father-in-law. "It came back marked 'No funds,' but we took the will for the deed, and you'll notice it has a prominent place among the presents."

A Kiss It Was!
There was a sudden screaming of brakes as the sports car skidded around the corner, struck a lamppost, careened across the pavement, turned back into the road, bumped into three cars, narrowly escaped knocking down a policeman, hit a wall, and finally came to a stop.

A breathless girl climbed out of the car, followed by an equally breathless young man. "Darling," he said, rapturously, "that's what I call a kiss!"

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Later Acquaintance
The henpecked husband was moaning his lot.
"But," said his friend, "I knew your wife Gertrude as a child—she was just 'Gert' to me!"
"Well," came the answer, "she's just 'rude' to me!"

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