

# THE SMOKY YEARS

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## INSTALLMENT 2 THE STORY SO FAR:

Dusty King and Lew Gordon were joint owners of the vast King-Gordon range which stretched from Texas to Montana. When building up this string of ranches, they continually had to fight the unscrupulous Ben Thorpe. Thorpe

rivalled King-Gordon in power and wealth, but he had gained his position through wholesale cattle rustling and gunplay. Their opposing interests came to a showdown when the Government announced the auctioning of the Crying

Wolf land in Montana. Bill Roper, King's adopted son, had inspected this territory and found it to contain an almost unbelievable wealth of grass. Bidding went high at the auction, but King beat out Thorpe to gain control of the land.

### CHAPTER II

An hour spent in the Wells Fargo office with the deputy commissioner, filling out forms, signing papers, ended as Dusty King and Bill Roper stood with Lew Gordon on the board walk. It was the first time the three had had a word alone since the Crying Wolf had passed into the hands of King-Gordon.

"Well," said Dusty King, "we got her."

"Maybe," Gordon said, "this is our chance. Maybe now we can get the cow business on a sound basis, here in the north, and have some order, and decent law."

"You'll never get a 'sound basis' until Ben Thorpe is bust," Dusty said. "What law enforcement we got in the West is rotten through and through with office holders that Thorpe owns."

"Some day," Gordon said slowly, "Ben Thorpe has got to go."

"Some day? Lew, we've got him beat!"

King's exuberant mood of victory was not to be dampened. "You want law and order?" he chortled. "We'll show 'em law and order!"

"That puts me in mind," said Gordon. "A feller passed me this here to give to you." He handed Dusty King a little twisted scrap of paper, torn off the corner of something else. Dusty untangled it, looked at it a moment, showed it to the others. Five words were penciled on it in sprawling black letters:

#### IN GOD'S NAME LOOK OUT

"Who's this from, Lew?"

Gordon's lips moved almost soundlessly. "Dry Camp Pierce."

Roper knew that name, without knowing what lengths of outlawry had brought Dry Camp Pierce to where he was today. Rewards backed by Ben Thorpe were on Dry Camp's scalp over half the West; probably it was as much as his life was worth to show himself in Ogallala now.

"This note—"

Dusty King tossed it off with a shrug. "Oh—I suppose Thorpe is getting drunk some place and spouting off about what all he's going to do to me, when he catches up." Dusty's teeth showed in his infectious grin. "I suppose Dry Camp thought I ought to know about it."

"He's right, Dusty," Lew Gordon said. "We do want to look out, all of us, all the time."

"We always had to look out," Dusty scoffed.

"It'll be the more so now. There isn't anything in the world Ben Thorpe's people will stop at, Dusty."

"Let 'em come on."

"We want to look out," Gordon said again.

"If you feel that way about it," said Dusty, "what was the idea of your working through that law we can't wear guns in town?"

Bill Roper said, "We could have brought it to an open shoot-out, five years ago—ten years ago. Better if we had."

Gordon shook his head. "Nothing ever gets fixed up with guns." Dusty King pulled his hat a little more on one side so that he could wink at Bill Roper unobserved. But he said, "He's partly right, Bill. Ben Thorpe isn't just one man any more. Walk Lasham—Cleve Tanner—any one of a dozen others could step into his shoes. It's a whole rotten organization has to be busted up."

"Ben Thorpe downed, and they'll quit," Bill Roper thought.

"Ben Thorpe down and it's only begun," Dusty countered. "Get it out of your head that you can fix anything up by downing Ben Thorpe. Not while this organization stands in one piece. Might be a good idea for you to remember that, Bill, in case anything happens."

"Dusty," Bill said, "if ever they get you, by God, I'll get Ben Thorpe if it's the last—"

"No," said Dusty. "You hear me? No. If they get me—you'll remember what I said. You remember you're fighting a thing, and a big one; not just one man." His face crinkled in that familiar, contagious grin. "Forget it! Dry Camp's spooky, that's all."

He hooked an arm through his partner's, and went swaggering off. Ten paces down the walk he stopped, turned, and came back. He leaned close to Roper. "If anything should happen, kid—remember what I said."

### CHAPTER III

That Lew Gordon had a daughter was not so surprising as that he had only one. Single-minded, he clung all his life to the memory of the wife he had lost when their first child was born.

Jody Gordon was twenty now. She didn't exactly run Lew Gordon; nobody did that. But it was fairly apparent that his stubborn bid for supremacy in western cattle was intended in her behalf, and without her would have been meaningless to him.

Because Gordon hadn't wanted his girl filtering around through the

press of Ben Thorpe's ruffians at the auction, getting his own boys into fights, Jody Gordon was waiting here for news of what had happened to the Crying Wolf. Bill Roper vaulted the foolish little picket gate, scuffed the mud off his boots on the high front steps, and let himself in. He sent a Comanche war gobble ringing through the house, but Jody was already flying into the room.

"Did you get it? Did you get it?"

"All of it!"

Jody flung herself at him, and kissed him; so sweet, so vital, so completely feminine that he wanted to keep her close to him. But she broke away again as he tried to hold her.

"How much did it cost?"

"Seventy cents—gold."

Jody's breath caught. "Can we come out on it?"

"Sure we can come out on it. Not a cent less would've turned the trick. Dusty—"

Jody sat on a walnut table that had come all the way from St. Louis, and swung her feet. The story seemed to tickle her in more ways than one. "I can just see you all,"

she said, "standing around making an impression on each other."

He turned from the window, and she was laughing at him as he had thought, her mouth smothered with her fingers.

"Come here a minute," he said, going toward her.

She twisted from the edge of the table, as if to put it between them, but she was too late. His rope-hard fingers caught her wrist, and held her as easily as if he had dallied a calf to the horn.

"Listen," he begged her. "Listen—"

He caught her up, clamped an arm behind her head, and kissed her hard. Hard, and for a long time.

So long as she was rigid in his arms, fighting him, he held her; but when she stood limp, neither yielding nor resisting, his arms relaxed, and Jody tore herself free. She lashed out at him like a little mustang, striking him across the mouth. Her face was white, all that quick, irrepressible laughter gone, as for a moment she looked at him.

A trickle of blood ran from Bill Roper's lips, and made a crooked mark on his chin. Then she turned and fled.

When she was gone Bill Roper stood still, sucking his cut lips. After a little while he went to the window, instinctively turning to open space for his answers.

He could remember Jody Gordon as a little tow-headed kid, before her hair had darkened into the elusive misty brown that it was now. Or as a colt-legged girl with scratches on her shins from riding bare-legged through the sage. Or as a peculiarly tempestuous, uncertain thing, neither child nor woman. But this latest phase he couldn't understand at all.

He picked up his hat, and for a little while stood turning it in his hands. Then he threw it in the corner, and went searching through the house.

Jody was in the tallest of the four foolish towers. From here you could see the town, and the slim, glittering line of the railroad, connecting these far plainsmen with a world hungry for beef.

Jody said matter-of-factly, "We've got to have more loading pens, Bill."

Bill's face broke into a slow grin. Abruptly he laid hard hands on disused sashes, and broke them open.

Into their little cubicle flowed the sweet air of the open prairie sweep, inspiring with the fresh smell of the new grass.

She said, "Tell me about your new job."

"It isn't new."

"They said that you'd be the new boss of the Crying Wolf, if we got it," Jody said.

For more years than he could remember, he had been working toward this opportunity—the chance to take two years, or three, with such-and-such cattle, on such-and-such land, and show that he could pay out on market deliveries in pounds of beef. But now—a million horns and hoofs didn't seem to mean so much.

Something was here—something that wasn't any place else—not on the long trail, not in the wild terminal towns. He knew now he had to tell her that, and he dreaded it, because she probably would think it was funny. He wouldn't look at her as he spoke, because he didn't want to see her laughing at him.

"I don't know as I'm so much interested as I was," he said.

"Why, Billy—not interested in the Crying Wolf—nearly five hundred square miles of feeder land! What's come over you?"

"I guess maybe I'm tired of riding alone," Bill said.

"Alone? With all the outfit you'll have—I wouldn't call it alone."

"I would. Grass country is lonely country," he said now, "as lonely as the dry plains. You get to wondering what the everlasting cattle add up to, in the course of a life. Then some night you know you don't care what they add up to; and you think, 'Damn fat beef!'"

"Why, Billy—why, Billy—"

"None of it means a damn, without you're there," he told her. "Working cattle doesn't mean anything, because you'll always have all the cattle you need anyway; and no long trail means anything, without you're at the end of it. I'm sick of long drive-trails, empty of you at the end."

There was a long, motionless silence; he kept his eyes on the far sand hills as presently she leaned forward to look up into his face.

"You really mean it, don't you?" Jody said.

Jody's words came very faint, and a little breathless.

"Why didn't you say so before?"

He looked at her then, and she wasn't laughing. In her eyes was a new, grave light, such as he had never seen; a warm light, a beloved light, better than sunset to a weary day-rider who has worked leather since before dawn. Timorously, but very willingly, she came into his arms; and he held her as if she were not only a very precious but a very fragile thing. For a little while it seemed that one trail, a trail longer than the Long Trail itself, had come to its end.

"Can't believe," he said at last, his lips in her hair, "you're sure-enough mine."

"All yours—all, all!"

They had one hour, there in the prairie lookout tower, discovering each other, getting acquainted as if for the first time. The sun went down in a gorgeous welter of color. Jody shivered a little. "I wish Dad and Dusty would come. Especially Dusty."

"Why?"

"He has so many enemies. Some of them are dangerous as diamond-backs. It worries me when he's due and doesn't get back."

"Dusty'll take care of himself," Bill Roper chuckled, and held her closer.

One half hour more . . . Up from the town came a crazy ridden horse, splashing mud eaves-high under the urge of spur and quirt.

"He'll lame his pony if he goes down in that slick," Bill commented. "Now what do you suppose—"

The rider tried to pull up in front of the house, and the frantic pony swerved and slid, mouth wide open to the sky. Its shoulder crashed the fence, taking down a dozen feet of pickets. The rider tumbled off, ran up the steps to hammer on the door.

Roper went clattering down the stairs, pulled open the door. "Now listen, you—"

"Bill—Dusty—Mr. King—he—"

Bill Roper froze, and there was a long moment of paralyzed silence. "Spit it out, man!" Roper shouted at him.

"Bill—he's daid!"

"Who—who—"

"Dusty King's daid Bill, they gunned him—they gunned him down!"

"Who did?"

"Tain't known. Mr. Gordon's there; he—"

Bill Roper walked out past the cowboy stiffly, like a man gone blind. Without knowing what he did he walked down to the gate, and stood gripping the pickets with his two hands.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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