

THE SMOKY YEARS

By ALAN LE MAY

W.N.U. Release

INSTALLMENT 10 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. Roper then left for Thorpe's Montana ranches. Jody, told that her father's life was in danger, left her home to ride 500 miles to warn him. Walk Lasham, manager of Thorpe's holdings in Montana, saw Roper sitting alone and unarmed in a saloon one day. Gun in hand, Lasham prepared to kill his hated antagonist who was leading the rustler's war.

CHAPTER XIII—Continued

But now the scar-mouthed man spoke suddenly; from his position at one side he had dared flick his eyes to the door. "Walk, look out! Don't turn! Watch this buzzard, but wheel back and stand by me!"

Into the front of the bar two men had come; they came striding back the length of the room; their spurs ringing brokenly. Roper did not see their guns come out. But suddenly the weapons of both of them appeared in their hands, smoothly and easily, from no place.

The two men were Lee Harnish and Tex Long.

Tex Long's .45 clicked in the palm of his hand as it came to full cock. He said, "Howdy, Bill. A spic girl just brought us word. Dave Shannon and Hat Crick Tommy are up the street. And Dry Camp Pierce."

"Gosh," Lee Harnish said, "we've been hunting you for two months! You want us to blast these Indians, boss?"

Bill Roper drew a deep breath, and grinned. At first he could not even appreciate that here, at last, were the leaders he needed for his great raid. All he could think of was that he had been reprieved from certain death; and he knew that life was good.

CHAPTER XIV

The tribute implied by the re-gathering of the wild bunch leaders was one of the most extraordinary things that had ever happened in Bill Roper's life. There was not much to their story. Driven out of Texas on the eve of Bill Roper's victory, for a while they had gone their separate ways. But gradually they had drifted together again, in the Indian nations, at Dodge, in the northern cow camps. With Cleve Tanner broken in Texas, and the roots cut from under Ben Thorpe's organization by the loss of his breeding grounds, the outlaw riders found themselves unwilling to leave their work unfinished. So at last they had come looking for Roper—and had found him.

The first thing was to get them out of there. He named as rendezvous a lonely shanty on Fork Creek.

Roper himself was the last to ride out of Miles City. Not one of his men could be trusted not to get a skiff of liquor, and go gunning for Lasham's men on his own hook.

Roper was relieved, therefore, upon riding into the Fork Creek rendezvous in the dreary February twilight, to find his Texas men already waiting for him there.

Lee Harnish looked sheepish. "Say, I forgot something. I got a letter for you here."

Roper took the worn envelope and stood turning it over in his hands. The date showed it to be three weeks old—no great age, everything considered. But what took hold of him, so that for a full minute he dared not break the seal, was that the letter was from Jody Gordon.

Roper ripped open the envelope. The whole note covered no more than half a page; but as he folded it and put it into a pocket, his hands were shaking.

With a visible effort, Roper pulled himself together. Briefly he told them what his new wild bunch had done.

"But we haven't even scratched the surface," he finished. "Unless we hit Walk Lasham quick and hard, Thorpe will get his balance again, and reach his roots back into Texas; and all the work we did down there will go for nothing."

"There's no one beyond the border that's needing any stock," Dry Camp Pierce said gloomily.

"Dry Camp," Bill Roper said, "I'm thinking of the tribes."

There was a moment's silence. "Granting that Canada's full of war paint," Tex Long said; "how the devil—"

"I've talked to Iron Dog."

Every one of them, each in his own way, pricked up his ears at that. Iron Dog was a famous warrior chief of the Gros Ventre Sioux. Ragged and starving, his decimated band driven far out of their home country, Iron Dog no longer was the stubbornly resisting force which had

once made his name. But though he was broken and hapless now, remnants of his leadership remained; his influence extended over many bands, and more than one tribe.

"I don't hold with dealing with red niggers, much," Dave Shannon said.

"These bucks are forced out of their ranges without any deal made whereby they get fed," Roper said. "Half of them are in as pitiful a state of starvation as you ever saw. A big part of the blame for that is on Walk Lasham. Now I aim to square the deal."

"I already made us a rendezvous with Iron Dog, before I knew you were in on this," Bill Roper told them now. "Inside of a month Iron Dog will be camped on the Milk River with anyway seven or eight bands."

"Seven or eight bands!" Tex Long shouted at him. "My God, there'll be worse than a thousand Indians on the Milk!"

"A thousand, hell!" Roper said. "If there aren't that many buck warriors alone, I'll eat the beef myself!"

The men in this little cabin were not easily surprised, and less easily



"Now I aim to square the deal."

shocked or awed; but their usually unrevealing faces now gave them away.

"God Almighty!" Dave Shannon said. It was almost a prayer.

"He's done it now," Hat Crick Tommy said slowly. "You know what happens when you throw that many loose Indians together? You got a war on your hands, by God! They'll come whooping down Montana—they'll tear the country wide open! The whole frontier will go up in a bust of smoke. Nothing'll ever stop 'em, once they get together like that!"

"One thing will."

"What will?"

"Grub," said Roper.

"That might be so," Dave Shannon admitted. "I never yet see an Indian go to war on a full stomach."

A tenseness had come into that dark cabin; they were realizing now that they stood in the shadow of events of a magnitude they had not dreamed. In the quiet, Bill Roper's hands kept creasing and recreasing the letter from Jody Gordon. A faint dampness showed on his forehead, but his fingers acted cold and awkward.

"There's five of us here," Tex Long said. "You expect us to just suddenly feed every Indian in creation?"

"I've got twenty-seven riders waiting to throw in with us at the first word."

"Twenty-seven riders? Where?"

"All over Montana. What do you think I did all winter? Holed up like a she-bear?"

Silence again, while they all studied Roper.

"How many you figure to move?" Tex Long asked at last.

Roper's voice was so low they could hardly hear his words. "Between twenty and thirty thousand head."

Tex Long threw his hat against the roof poles in a gesture of complete impatience. "Dead of winter," he said; "maybe having to fight part of the time; why, thirty-fourty cowboys couldn't drive—"

"We don't have to handle this stock like fat beef," Roper reminded him. "We don't have to pull up for quicksand, or stampede losses, or high water. If a hundred head get swept down a river, what the hell? Some different Indians will get hold of 'em downstream. Working that way, hard and fast, thirty cowboys can move every head in Montana!"

"We're terrible short of time,"

Tex Long said.

"I know it; in another couple of months their chuck wagons will be heading out, and the deep grass will be full of their riders. We have to move and move quick."

"It might be," Dry Camp Pierce declared himself, "it just could be done." A hard gleam was coming into the old rustler's waty eyes. "And if it can—great God! There's never been nothing like this!"

The others seemed to have had the breath knocked out of them by the unheard-of scope, the bold daring, the headlong all-or-nothing character of the plan.

"This is bigger than the Texas raids," Tex Long said wonderingly. "This is bigger than anything has ever been!"

Suddenly Dave Shannon smacked his thigh with his huge hand. "By God, I believe it'll bust 'em!"

Over the pack of outlawed youngsters had come a wave of that fanatic enthusiasm which sometimes sways men as they face the impossible, but Roper, strangely, was unable to share it. The great raid he had planned all winter now seemed futile—a plan senseless and cold.

"Bill," said Lee Harnish, "what's the matter with you? You got chills and fever, or something?"

Roper spoke to Harnish alone, as if he had forgotten the others. "That letter was from Jody Gordon," he said.

"Bad news, son?"

"I don't know. She wants me to come to Ogallala."

"When?"

"Now—right away."

"What for? Does she say?"

"She says she needs me; she says she needs me bad, and right away. I guess she does, all right. If she didn't, I don't believe she'd ever write to me."

The faces of the wild bunch riders were expressionless, noncommittal; Roper knew they wouldn't have much to say. They were youngsters still—all except Pierce; but their faces were carved lean and hard by long riding, and a lot of that riding had been for him.

He stood up, shaking his shoulders.

"Catch up your ponies."

"We pulling out? Tonight yet?"

"You bet your life we are. Ought to make Red Horse Springs by midnight."

"And after that," Harnish said slowly, "what is it, Bill? Is it Ogallala?"

Once more the silence, while they waited for Bill.

"It's the raid," Roper said.

CHAPTER XV

Lew Gordon came stumping across the corral of his little Miles City house, his spurs ringing at every stride. His big hands, rope-hardened and thickened at the knuckles, swung loose at his sides; but his face had the look of a man beset.

Opening the back door of the house he sent a great roar through the walls—"Jody! Jody, where are you?"

She answered him, and Lew Gordon went to find her.

"What's the meaning of this?" was his greeting as his daughter came running to him through the house. "You were supposed to stay in Ogallala!"

Jody threw her arms about his neck and pulled his head down to kiss him; but Lew Gordon was not to be put off.

"That horse wrangler just brought me word that you was here," he said. "There's a pretty kettle of soap, when some horse wrangler knows more about where a man's daughter is at than he knows himself!"

"Dad, will you please sit down? I tell you, I want to talk to you!"

"Oh, all right," Lew Gordon flopped into a chair, jabbed his spurs into the floor at long range, and tore off another huge mouthful of beef.

"There are two pieces of bad news," Jody said now. "First thing, Ben Thorpe has cut under us in the bidding for the government contracts, at Dodge."

A spark leaped into Lew Gordon's eyes; under the pressure of the last two years he had turned edgy and garrulous, as if his mind had become hasty on the trigger, now that his hands were idle. "I might have known it!" his big voice boomed. "Those infernal—"

"The loss of those contracts is going to hurt," Jody said; "I've brought the books up into fair shape, and it looks to me as if King-Gordon is starting the worst year in history. If the losses go on piling up the way they are—"

Jody Gordon came and sat on the arm of her father's chair. "There was a man rode up to Ogallala from Dodge City," she said. "He brought some very peculiar news, and I don't like it at all."

"If that renegade Colorado outfit think they're going to—" Lew Gordon began.

"This was a Bill Roper man," Jody said.

Lew Gordon checked as suddenly as if he had been struck across the face.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Smile Awhile

As Promised
"Show me an Irishman and I'll show you a fool."
"Well, I'm an Irishman."
"Er—and I'm the fool!"

Marriage is an education. Yes, after a time wives get to "no" a thing or two.

These Days
Mr. Meeker—So you're lost, little man? Why didn't you hang on to your mother's skirt?
Jackie (sniff)—Pleath, thir, I couldn't reach it.

The Impertinence
It was her fourth or fifth venture into the lottery of marriage—the film star wasn't sure which. So when the registrar's clerk began asking a few questions she got annoyed.
"Have you been married before?" he asked. "And, if so, to whom?"
This was too much. In her most freezing manner the star demanded: "What is this—a memory test?"

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