



THE SMOKY YEARS

By ALAN LE MAY

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INSTALLMENT 14 THE STORY SO FAR:

Dusty King and Lew Gordon had built up a vast string of ranches. 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. After wiping Thorpe out of Texas, Roper conducted a great raid upon Thorpe's vast herds in Montana. Unable to reconcile her father with Roper, Jody set out with Shoshone to find him. They were attacked by some of Thorpe's men hiding in Roper's shack. Wilce escaped, but Jody was captured. Roper was approaching one of his own shacks when he noticed outposts keeping a careful watch.

CHAPTER XIX—Continued

To Roper's right, surprisingly close, a rifle spoke, once only. Roper could neither see the man who had fired nor guess his target. He waited five minutes, gun ready, then stood up and moved his pony down-slope into a shallow draw in which it was hidden by the brush. Moving cautiously, he proceeded north along the cut, seeking the position of the man who had fired.

Through the hillside brush a figure moved, crouching so low that his dark shape resembled a bear. After a moment Bill Roper was able to make out that the approaching man carried a light carbine.

The man with the carbine moved swiftly down the hillside, sliding on the hard crust of the snow, but surprisingly silent in the brush.

The watched man dropped into the ravine, angling toward the bend where Roper stood. Bill Roper pulled himself out of the gully. He was crouched in dense brush, gun in hand, as the scout appeared below him.

Roper stood up. "Steady," he said.

The man in the draw jumped as if he had been struck; but as he raised his hands he straightened so that Roper saw his face.

His captive was Shoshone Wilce. "By God," said Shoshone, "I was never so glad to see anybody in my life!"

Roper's voice bit like frosty ice. "You know where she is?"

"Yeah," said Shoshone. "Yeah, I know where she is."

Roper dropped into the gully to snarl close into Shoshone's face. "Is she alive? Is she all right?"

"Oh, yeah, sure," Wilce assured him. "She's alive, all right. Don't seem like she's hurt any. I—"

"Don't seem like?" Roper repeated. "Damn your hide, where is she?"

"Bill, seems like them buzzards have her down there at that cabin, and won't leave her loose."

"Who won't?"

"Bill, I don't know who."

"Well, how the devil did she get there?"

"Me," Shoshone said. He met Roper's eye bleakly. Obviously, he knew that he was in trouble here. "I brought her."

"Why in all—"

"She would have come anyway, Bill. She was dead set on locating you. She didn't have nobody else to ride with her. I figured you'd sooner I'd try to bring her direct to you, so somebody would be with her, than have her wandering loose around the country by herself. A bartender in Miles told me you were here, and we rode here. And then—"

"Well, then—what?"

"As I come into the valley," Shoshone said, "seemed to me like something was wrong. But I couldn't make out what. We come up to the cabin careful and slow, in the dark. But they seen us coming and they laid for us, I guess. Before we knew what had busted, they gunned her pony down, and they drilled mine twice so bad that I had to turn him loose. Most likely he's dead by now. I—"

"And you run out and left her," Bill filled in for him.

"Bill, I swear, I wouldn't have done nothing like that, not for no amount. Thing was, they was all around me; I couldn't see where to shoot or who they was. I figured first it was your own boys, making a mistake, and after I seen it wasn't, I just figured to keep in a fighting position, you might say, and close in first chance. Only—"

"Only you never saw any chance," Roper said with contempt.

"Well, no; there's seven of 'em down there, Bill, and they keep an awful steady watch. And I been scouting 'em steady ever since. Sometimes I get in a long shot at one or another of 'em. This carbine don't carry so very good, but I plugged two of 'em; don't know how bad."

"How do you know she wasn't shot or hurt when her horse went down?" Roper demanded. "By God, Shoshone, if you let anything happen to that girl—"

"They let her walk outside sometimes during the day," Shoshone said. "That's how I seen she's all right."

"Can you make out who the bunch down there is?"

"I figure they're some Thorpe gun squad, out after your scalp. I figure they was laying to gun you. And now that they got the girl, I figure that they aim to hold her for bait, kind of."

Shoshone fell silent, and Roper, deep in thought, let him rest.

"You're most likely right," Roper said morosely at last. "There's four or five of these Thorpe war parties out after me; and this could easy be one. But of all the infernal luck I ever saw—What did Jody want with me? Did she tell you?"

"Thorpe has made up his mind to kill her old man," Shoshone said. "I went and told her, because I thought you'd want her to know, so she could maybe look out for him some. But the old man wouldn't

listen to her and they had a row. So then the only thing she could think of was to come to you. She's got some notion of trying to get you and her old man together again."

"A fine chance!"

"That's what I told her. But she—"

"Why in God's name," Roper flared at him again, "didn't you go after help?"

"I figured I'd get strung up for sure," Shoshone said flatly, "if I went and told Gordon what I'd done. I wanted to come for you, but naturally I didn't know where you'd went. The only thing I could figure out, I better try to ghost around these hills and maybe whittle 'em down to my size."

"You say there are seven men in the cabin," Roper asked at last; "two wounded?"

Shoshone nodded. "They ain't all in the cabin all of the time. Seems like they must have had the girl tell 'em that she come here to meet you. Naturally they'd think you knew she was coming. Most likely they figure that if I ain't dead I'm carrying you word that will bring you here a-king. So they're holding her there now until they see if they can't get you. I ain't watched

Wilce to find him. They were attacked by some of Thorpe's men hiding in Roper's shack. Wilce escaped, but Jody was captured. Roper was approaching one of his own shacks when he noticed outposts keeping a careful watch.

He shook Shoshone Wilce. The little man groaned once, then came full awake with the sudden response of an animal.

Without the snow the rock-like impenetrability of the overcast sky would have made the night utterly black, but the ghostly pallor of the snow had the effect of faintly modifying the darkness. The eye might possibly have made out a moving dark shape at ten yards; beyond that there was nothing but a muf-fling blackness.

"You lead out," Roper said. His voice was instinctively hushed, even at this distance from the enemy. "You've had more chance to study the lay than me."

Shoshone Wilce delayed. "Bill," he said, "I lay thinking about this time for a long time, after you was asleep." A dogged stubbornness came into his tone. "I figure we can probably take the cabin. And if we take the cabin without fighting we've got a chance to get away. But if so much as one shot is fired—Bill, the outposts will close like a b'r trap. I don't see no way we can ever get clear."

By the sudden frozen silence, Shoshone Wilce was able to sense Bill Roper's anger.

"I wish to God," Bill Roper said at last, "I had Hat Crick Tommy here, or Tex Long; or even the very greenest kid cowboy that's riding the range with them, somewhere to-night. I need one other man for this job. It wouldn't take an especially brave man, or smart man, nor a real good gunfighter. I just need one fairly good man. But I haven't even got that!"

"Bill, I only claim—look, Bill: I ain't afraid of 'em. I only—"

"You ain't afraid," Bill Roper repeated; "no—not much. But when the guns spoke, you left a girl down under her horse in the snow—maybe hurt, maybe dead—and you ran for your life."

When Bill Roper had said that, both were utterly still, while a man might have counted a hundred.

Shoshone's voice was flat and dead. "Is that the way it looks to you?"

"Look at it yourself."

"Then," Shoshone said, "I guess there ain't anything more to say." He stood up.

"There's this to say," Bill Roper said. "You're going to work with me tonight because I haven't got anybody else. You're going to do exactly what I say, and when I say, without any back talk or question. You make one slip tonight and the West won't hold you, nor the world won't hold you, and you'll answer to me in the end. You hear me?"

"Okay," Shoshone said in the sarge flat, dead voice.

"One thing more," Roper said. "If we make a quiet job, we'll try to go out slow and quiet, the three of us together. Otherwise, you take Jody's lead rope and ride like hell. Six miles below here, near the creek, there's a kind of a brush corral. You and the girl will wait for me there. Wait for me until daylight begins to come; then go on."

They moved down into the valley of the Fork, walking fast. When they had dropped into the bed of Fork Creek itself they moved northward, following its windings, for what seemed a long way; but no sign of approaching dawn yet showed, and Roper felt that they had plenty of time. As they at last passed the point where the cabin stood, invisible in the dark, Shoshone indicated its location with raised arm; but they moved on fifty yards farther, so that they might approach the cabin from the north.

Cautiously now, Shoshone climbed the bank, silent as the Indians with whom he had spent his youth. Turning, he gripped Bill Roper's arm. His words were whispered close to Roper's ear.

"One of the night guards is out that-a-way, about five hundred yards," he whispered; "about in line with where you see that big dead pine."

Roper could see no dead pine. It annoyed him that Shoshone's eyes were better than his own—as good as the eyes of an Indian, or a lynx.

"I'll leave my carbine standing just outside the door," Shoshone said. "I only want it for later, after we've took to the horses."

"That's all right," Roper said. "But you remember this: If there's any trouble in the cabin, you stand and fight! Because if you don't, I'll turn and plug you myself, if it takes my last shot to do it."

"Okay."

Roper went ahead now, walking boldly across the snow. Better, he thought, to simulate the casual approach of friends than to depend upon a hope of complete surprise.

As he raised his hand to the door a strange thrill of dread momentarily stirred him at the thought that Jody Gordon was inside—with whom?

CHAPTER XX

There were no stars when Roper roused himself in his blankets, and he had no mechanical means of tell-

ing the time. Yet he knew very definitely that dawn was just two hours away.

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