

# THE SMOKY YEARS

By ALAN LE MAY

W.N.U. Release

## INSTALLMENT 19

### 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. Roper conducted a series of great raids upon Thorpe's vast herds, first in Texas, then in Montana. Jody was deeply shaken when Marquita, a saloon hostess, convincingly explained that Roper loved Marquita, and not her. Believing that her love was answered,

Jody left the man she loved. Lew Gordon finally realized that Roper was right in fighting Thorpe and Lasham, and went gunning for them. Roper met him shortly before the two gunmen appeared. This was the moment Roper had been fighting for during the smoky years.

### CHAPTER XXVI

They buried Lew Gordon at Miles City. That dot upon the northern prairie marked, in effect, the farthest north reached by that great and dramatic upthrust of power which had welled up out of Texas, carving new trails, opening new vast countries, driving herds unnumbered, under the name of King-Gordon. Jody thought that her father would have wanted to lie there.

After that was done with, Jody went back to Ogallala. All through the spring news kept trickling in. A swift bankruptcy was sweeping Thorpe's loosely grouped organizations. Wiped out of Texas by the so-called Rustlers' War, broken in the north by the Great Raid—the shaken power of Ben Thorpe crumbled fast, now that Thorpe himself was dead. A once unbeatable organization, powerful from border to border, was going down in such utter debacle as no man could check.

And as Thorpe's power vanished into the gunsmoke in which he had died, a strange new prestige began to attach itself to the name of the man who had destroyed him. Only a little while ago Bill Roper had been an outlaw, a hunted man with a price on his head, in whose behalf few men ever dared speak a good word. But now that his enemies were down, it seemed that the whole length of the Long Trail held men who professed themselves his life-long friends. Like coyotes after a killing, like worms after rain, Bill Roper partisans were rising up, a score here, a hundred there, where not one friend had been, during those smoky hours of his greatest need. Already men were less ready to remember what weapons he had used in fighting fire with fire than to remember simply that he had won. Three governors had issued blanket pardons for what he might or might not have done. He could have had almost any position he wanted near the top of any one of three or four of the great cattle companies. He could have had almost anything he wanted, then.

But Bill Roper—where was he? Nobody seemed to know. His own raiders—Tex Long, Hat Crick Tommy, Dave Shannon—now swaggering wherever they pleased amid a curious acclaim, did not know. And if Dry Camp Pierce, that one most trusted of all Bill Roper's men, knew where his leader was, he held his tongue.

Jody Gordon was making every effort to find out Bill Roper's whereabouts.

The weeks passed, and the new grass came on the prairie, and still there was no word. Two or three times a week, after the first spring flowers began to show, Jody Gordon rode out to the pile of stone with its wooden cross that marked Dusty King's grave, putting there little handfuls of blue Indian hyacinth and white anemone.

And then suddenly one day as she sat her horse before Dusty King's cross she knew that Bill Roper was alive, that he was near, that he had come. The notch that she had seen Bill Roper cut in the arm of Dusty's cross to mark the death of Cleve Tanner was well weathered by this time; but now, sharp and freshly cut in the opposite arm of the cross, was a second notch that had never been there before.

A choking lump rose instantaneously in Jody's throat, and she spun her pony in its tracks as instinctively her eyes swept the plain and the low hills. So freshly cut was the new notch upon the cross that it seemed Bill Roper must still be no more than a few minutes away.

In the clear light of the late afternoon she could make out every detail of the rambling little town of Ogallala, but nowhere was there to be seen any horseman. She turned her pony and rode home with a strange, empty, gone feeling, because for a moment Bill Roper had seemed so near and now was nowhere in sight.

When she had unsaddled she went into the tall white house by the back way, and walked through it slowly, preoccupied, wondering what she should do.

Then, as she came into the front room, her hand jumped to her throat, for someone was waiting for her there—a woman who stood up as Jody came in.

For a moment Jody Gordon hardly recognized Marquita. Only a little time had passed since they had faced each other in a remote cabin set in Montana snows, yet Marquita looked unmistakably older; and the live, sultry fire behind her dark, slanting eyes was gone.

"I lied to you," Marquita said at last. "I'm not sorry for that. I'd lie to you again, for the same reason, or for less reason. But this time it didn't do any good. So I thought I might as well tell you."

"You lied to me?"

"I told you I was Bill Roper's girl. You naturally thought I was at Walk Lasham's camp because Bill Roper was there." Marquita's voice sounded curiously metallic and

old, without that sultry fire to back it up. "Well, that wasn't so."

"You mean—you mean to say—"

"Well," Marquita said, "he did not belong to me, not even for one minute, in all my life. How do you think you would like that, in my place?"

"But—at the Lasham camp you said—"

"I know I did. I would have got him if I could, in any way I could. I even came here because I knew he was coming here. But now I can just as well tell you it's hopeless, and I'm through. After all, I don't need to run after any man; not any more."

"You mean—you're willing to let him go—even if—"

"Let him go? I never had him." An odd edge of contempt came into Marquita's voice, but whether for Jody or herself was not plain. "Can't you get that through your head?" She turned toward the door impatiently.

Jody Gordon supposed that she ought to thank Marquita for having come here, for having made the confession which she had made, but she was confused, and the words would not come. Instead she said, "Do you know where he is? Is he well? Is he safe and all right?"

Marquita's smile was mocking. "You want me to find him and send him to you?"

"I think," Jody said, "he'll come."

"Okay," Marquita said, and she pulled open the door.

"I want to tell you something," Jody said. "I want to tell you I appreciate your letting me know—"

Marquita flashed a queer, hard smile; there was bitterness in it, more bitterness in her smile than in her words. "Keep your thanks to yourself." Then she was gone.

After a moment Jody heard the hoofs of a team, and the wheels of the carriage in which Marquita had come—and gone—slicing the deep mud.

Yet, Bill Roper did not come. When two days had passed a panic caught Jody Gordon, and she began to haunt the vicinity of Dusty King's cross. She believed that Roper would not leave the Ogallala country without visiting once more the grave of Dusty King.

But it was the evening of the fourth day, before Roper came.

### CHAPTER XXVII

Sitting her quiet pony beside Dusty King's pile of stone, Jody Gordon saw Roper riding toward her when he was still a long way off. Roper was not alone. Beside him rode a little grasshoppery figure in disreputable clothes which Jody recognized as that of Dry Camp Pierce. Somehow Dry Camp had managed to rejoin his chief when the others could not. It was typical of Dry Camp that he was riding beside Bill Roper now; would always be typical, so long as both of them should live.

The two riders hesitated at the five hundred yards. Roper said something to Dry Camp Pierce and after a moment or two Dry Camp turned his horse and went back. Bill Roper came on alone. Perhaps he feared this meeting more than anything he had ridden into yet—but she knew he would not turn.

It seemed to Jody Gordon that

time lagged forever as Billy Roper's pony slowly approached; it seemed to her that that slow approach was characteristic of all that had happened to them—delay, and delay, while wars were fought, and raids struck in, all through those smoky years in which they had been apart.

And yet, at last, when he stopped his horse beside her, and they looked at each other, there was something between them still, as if the smoky years themselves had built a wall.

Bill Roper said, "Hello, Jody. You're looking mighty well."

Jody said, "I'm all right."

There was a pause, curiously awkward; in the pause, Jody's horse struck at the cinch with a hind foot, tormented by an early fly.

"You didn't come to see me," Jody said.

"Well," Bill Roper said slowly—"I didn't know if you'd want me to."

"Don't you know that you're half of King-Gordon? And I'm the other half."

"Jody—people like you and me can't go by things like that—things like legacies and wills."

Jody's voice was very quiet, yet it must have seemed to Bill Roper that she cried out. "You're going to leave me to carry all this, just by myself?"

"Lew Gordon left a sound organization," Bill Roper said, his voice dead. "You have many men, and good men, too. The works will roll, I think, with Thorpe gone."

Once more the long, strangely poignant silence. And to Jody it seemed a terrible thing that what they both wanted was the same thing, and that yet the smoky years somehow managed to stand between.

Jody Gordon turned away from Bill Roper, and faced Dusty King's cross, clean-limbed and slender, and there was something in her face that was enduring. It was the face of a woman who turned to the future without trace of doubt or fear; and she was the loveliest thing that Bill Roper would ever see.

"Jody," Bill Roper said uncertainly. "I want to tell you something. Other men will have to fight other wars; but my part of all that is finished. I'm not sorry my gun is hung up. I hope it's hung up forever. Once I thought that when Thorpe was smashed, my work would be through—but now I see it's only begun. I think we're going to build something pretty fine, if you'll stay by me."

Jody smiled a little. Without taking her eyes from the cross she reached her hand toward him, and took his.

"All the anger and the hate has gone out of me," Roper said; "and if you can only some day understand that my riding with the wild bunch was—was what I had to do—"

He fumbled for words, and stopped.

"Give me your knife," Jody said. "My—my what?"

She turned, and herself drew his skinning knife from the sheath at his belt. Then she stepped to the ground.

"In justice," Jody said; "in justice, and in memory of courage."

With her own hands she cut the third notch upon the cross, deep and clean.

[THE END]



## Vanished Men BY GEORGE MARSH

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**ASK ME ANOTHER?**  
A General Quiz

### The Questions

1. What country originated chile con carne?
2. What American university was once called King's college?
3. In the United States what is a burgee?
4. In what year did the first ocean steamer pass through the Panama canal?
5. Can you name a presidential power under the Constitution which has never been exercised by a President?
6. What are the two most northerly countries of South America?
7. What American naval vessel was called "a cheese box on a raft?"
8. The Cape of Good Hope is the southernmost point of which continent?

### The Answers

1. Mexico.
2. Columbia.
3. A flag with swallow tails.
4. In 1914.
5. Power to adjourn congress.
6. Colombia and Venezuela.
7. The Monitor.
8. Africa.

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