

THE SMOKY YEARS

By ALAN LE MAY

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INSTALLMENT 12 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

the opposition of his sweetheart, Jody Gordon, and her father. After wiping Thorpe out of Texas, Roper conducted a great raid upon the vast herds on Thorpe's Montana ranches. Told that Jody had disappeared, he left his men

and set out for the home of Lew Gordon, a man who was once his partner, but was now his enemy. Jody Gordon had tried to reconcile her father with Roper; failing, she set out with Shoshone Wilce, one of Roper's men, to find him.

CHAPTER XVII

Shoshone Wilce, riding with Jody Gordon through the same hundred-mile snow which screened Bill Roper and Tex Long in their aid on the Little Dry, found himself the most bewildered and the most unhappy of men.

He could have refused to guide Jody Gordon to Bill Roper's rendezvous; he thought it improbable that Jody Gordon would have been able to locate the rendezvous alone. But whether she found it, or merely got herself lost, Shoshone Wilce would have been answerable to Bill Roper for leaving her to attempt the ride alone.

The alternative he had chosen offered no greater prospect for a long and helpful life. Lew Gordon would go wild as a wounded silvertip at the disappearance of his daughter; and every King-Gordon cowboy in the country would be scouring the brakes after Shoshone's scalp.

Jody believed now that the split between Lew Gordon and Bill Roper was the basis of inconceivable disaster—not only immediate and personal, but far-reaching in its import to the cow country. Together, those two very different cattlemen could have beaten Thorpe, and consolidated the King-Gordon empire.

Separated, Lew Gordon and Bill Roper were mutually destructive; Lew Gordon was probably right that Bill Roper's savage attacks upon the Thorpe interests were the cause of Ben Thorpe's heavy reprisals upon King-Gordon. And even though Roper might bring down Ben Thorpe in the end, which still seemed incredible, he could never profit by his victory, even if he lived. Unless Gordon and Roper could be reconciled, Roper would in the end become just one more outlawed cowboy whose trails could have no meaning, and only one end.

Jody Gordon had one other motive in attempting the all but hopeless reconciliation. She believed her father's life to be in the sharpest danger. Bill Roper, an even harder fighter than the old trail breaker who had trained him, would automatically take those precautions that would safeguard her father's life, if once they could be brought to work together again.

But the first move toward reconciliation must come from Bill Roper himself. If she could persuade Roper to this, there was a bare possibility that she could also manage her father.

It was a forlorn hope; but, as she saw it, of such vital importance that it could no longer be ignored. It was as if events that would alter the whole history of the cow country lay in her persuasion of these two stubborn men. She rode doggedly now, with set face, trusting Shoshone to find the way.

They rode until after midnight, blind, as far as Jody could see, in the wet fall of the snow. They threw down their bedrolls then in the shelter of stunted snow-laden trees, and Shoshone Wilce measured grain for the horses onto his own poncho.

They pushed on again early the next morning, miserable in the raw dawn, after coffee which Shoshone made in a frying pan. All day long they rode steadily, stopping only once for bread and bacon, and to bolster their horses with more grain.

The snow slacked off, giving place to a bitter wind. Jody's knees stiffened with saddle cramp and she continually had to nurse her fingers deep in her pockets to keep them from going numb. She had a strange sense of having taken an irrevocable step which she might find great reason to regret. The fact that the snow had hidden the trail they had made, so that no one could follow to find her, gave her a feeling of being cut off from everything friendly she had ever known. She no longer knew where she was. She set her eyes straight ahead, too proud to ask Shoshone how far they had come, or how much farther they must go.

Just before dusk they climbed a long rocky ridge which commanded the length of a shallow valley set brokenly with juniper and ragged cedar.

Shoshone motioned her to stop her horse. "Wait a minute."

Far down the valley Jody Gordon could see a faint haze that blurred a rabbit-fur grey and brown of the brush and runty timber.

"That's smoke," Shoshone Wilce said at last. "This ought to be the place."

"So we really got here at last..."

"Two hours more."

"The smoke—that means he's there."

Shoshone Wilce, suspicious and doubtful by temperament, was less sure. "Don't know if it's him. Somebody's there. Or, anyway, somebody's been there."

Now Shoshone Wilce reached out to catch her bridle reins, and they stopped. She started to ask what was the matter, but checked herself. Wilce had become tensely watchful, and she saw that he was listening.

After a moment or two of utter stillness, Wilce whispered "Wait a minute;" and pushed his horse slowly forward into the dark. For a little while as he moved away from her she could see the tall black silhouette of his horse against the pale snow, but soon this blurred with the darkness and was lost.

Growing impatient at last, and a little uneasy, Jody moved her pony ahead after Shoshone. There was a moment or two of panic, in which it seemed that she had lost him altogether in the dark; but her pony knew where the other was if she did not, and presently brought her alongside.

Shoshone Wilce was sitting perfectly motionless on his horse, staring ahead into a darkness to which the snow gave a curiously deceptive luminosity that did not aid the eye.

"I don't like this so good," Shoshone said.

"What's the matter?"

"No lights."

They moved ahead a little now, Jody holding her pony beside that of Shoshone Wilce. Shoshone moved his horse forward twenty paces, and



Wilce whispered, "Wait a minute."

stopped again for a full minute; then ten paces more.

Jody said, "What in the world—" Wilce seized her arm and silenced her with a quick shake. Then suddenly—

An inarticulate oath snarled in Shoshone's throat; he snatched at Jody's rein, whirling her pony. His own horse came straight up on its hind legs as he spun it at close quarters.

"Get going!" he said between his teeth; and brought his rostral down across her pony's flank in a snapping cut that made it plunge ahead. She heard the rip of steel on leather as Shoshone's gun came out. Then the silence of the night exploded into happenings that were incredible.

Two guns smashed out in a swift flurry of detonation. A queer whistling grunt was knocked out of Jody's horse. It dropped from under her, and the ground struck upward with stunning violence.

For a moment Jody Gordon lay motionless, her cheek buried in the cool snow. She was aware of further firing, and more than one running horse, and she tasted blood from a cut lip; but at first she was unable to think.

Someone said, "Well, we got one of 'em, anyway."

"Haul him inside."

"Look out now, Bud—no funny business." The voice was unknown to her, as was the figure that now bent over her. Suddenly the man jerked forward to peer at her more closely.

"What the—Hey! It's Calamity Jane, or somebody!"

Jody Gordon struggled to her feet, shock giving way to anger. "You fools, are you crazy? Bill Roper will kill you for this!"

There was a moment's silence, and she sensed rather than saw that they were looking at each other.

"Bill Roper," one of them repeated. "She says she's looking for Bill Roper!"

"Lady, you better come inside!"

Dazed and shaky as the fall of her killed horse had left her, Jody Gordon still appeared the most self-possessed of them all as she al-

lowed herself to be led into the little cabin at which she had hoped to find Bill Roper.

The shack in which she now found herself was a cramped makeshift, intended only as a shelter for cowboys, storm-caught while riding the northern limits of the Fork Creek range. A single lantern hung from a roof pole; and now, by its yellow light the two men studied her with an unconcealed amazement.

"By God," said the older of the two, "it's a girl, all right!"

The other man, tall enough so that the door at his back looked small, was much the younger of the two. His face was prematurely hard-cut—the face of a man who even in youth had learned an effectiveness in action upon which he could well rely. He spoke sharply.

"Jim—you know who this is? That's Lew Gordon's girl!"

"Good Lord Almighty! I believe you're right!"

"It's her, sure enough!"

"So you know me?" Jody said.

"I seen you once in Ogallala, and another time in Bandera."

The older man shifted his eyes to his partner. "Queerest turn of the cards," he said, "I ever seen in all my born days!"

The younger man's voice was sharp and strained. "Jim, we got to get her out of here, and get her out quick!"

The man called Jim appeared to consider intently, his eyes still on the other's face. "I ain't so sure," he said after a moment.

"You talk like a fool," the younger man snapped at his superior. "Look what we got! We got the law back of us. We got the most powerful cowman in the West back of us. We got one of the biggest rewards that's ever been hung up, right ready to drop into our hands. We've located Roper's main shebang, after working on it for months. We got all the odds in the world in our favor—and here comes this girl and bogs the whole works!"

"Just how do you figure she bogs it?"

"We got every chance of nailing our man, right here, any hour now. But don't ever think we'll nail him without a hell of a sharp fight. Suppose this girl gets hurt in this fight, or gets loose and loses herself, or runs out of luck some other way? The quicker we get her out of here—"

"Can't."

"What's the reason we can't?"

"We got the bear by the tail. She's dynamite so long as she's here. I grant you that. But what if we leave her go? She warns Roper off. Then where are we?"

The younger man's eyes were keen with a repressed excitement. "Jim—you figure she come to meet Bill Roper here?"

"She didn't come here by accident," Leathers said with conviction, "any more than you or me. And she sure didn't come here to throw in with us."

A swift panic struck Jody with the shock of a blow in the face. If Jim Leathers wished, he could hold her here—literally as bait with which to draw the man whom it was his mission to kill. If Shoshone Wilce had got clear, and could reach Roper, Roper would certainly attack as soon as the best ponies of the raiders could bring him. Or, failing to locate Roper, Shoshone Wilce might even bring her father—and what orders Jim Leathers had in regard to Lew Gordon she could only surmise.

"I'm getting sick of this," Jody told Jim Leathers. "You owe me a horse; there can't possibly be any argument about that. I'll have to ask you to rope a pony and bring him to my saddle—and I'll be on my way!"

Slowly Leathers shook his head. "You won't give me a pony?"

"I'm afraid—you'll have to wait until your friends come, lady."

For Jody Gordon's white flash of anger there was no outlet whatever. She turned away to hide from them the furious tears that sprang into her eyes. She took off her sheepskin coat and flung it on the table, for the room was very hot; but because her fingers were still chilled to the bone she pulled off her gloves, tucked them in her belt, and went to the shallow fireplace to hold out her hands to the flames.

They went on talking now in the drawing, well-considered speech of the trail, long pauses marking every interchange. Whatever else they might think of her, they evidently did not consider that she implied any necessity to secrecy.

"If Roper is on his way," the younger rider said thoughtfully, "and this side rider of hers has got loose and meets him, so that Roper knows what he's up against—that might be kind of bad medicine, Jim. If he's got his war-riders with him—"

"I've missed hooking up with Roper twenty times when I thought I had him," Leathers said. "I'd sooner meet up with him on any terms, than carry back the word that I fell down."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

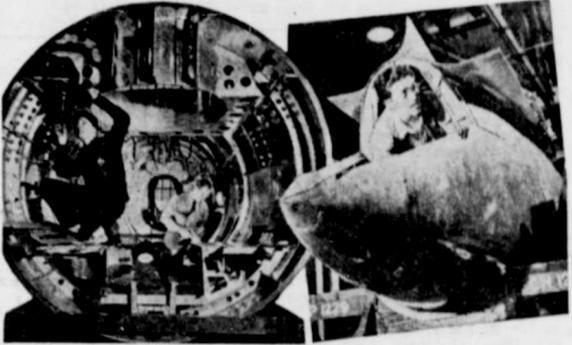
Making Our 'Flying Fortress'

One of the large cogs in the U. S. defense machinery is the Glenn L. Martin aircraft factory in Baltimore, Md., where the B-26, Uncle Sam's super "flying fortress," is being turned out in quantity lots. This is one of the most powerful airplanes in the world. These photos take you inside the workshops of Vulcan.



Wearing heavy metal shoes, a fireproof suit and a helmet that looks like a diver's, a worker pours molten metal.

This worker is using a band-saw to trim a compound contour formed on a Martin drop hammer. This will go on a bomber.



There are two miles of wiring in the B-26. At the left we see a cross section of the tail section with equipment and gadgets being installed. Right: Like a modern Jonah emerging from a flying whale, this workman is coming from the tail of the B-26.



The first step after one of the giant B-26's leaves the assembly line is to give it a thorough ground test. This flying fortress, destined for the U. S. army, is pictured undergoing such a test.



Below: Glenn L. Martin, with models of two famous Martin bombers of other days. On the table is the Martin bomber of the first World war.



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"In New York," he said, "they have a company that does nothing but answer phone calls for other people."

"Shucks," said the man with three pretty daughters, "I've been doing that for years, myself."

Trouble
"What's wrong with these shoes, boy?" asked the store clerk. "No matter how I fold my feet," explained the strapping country lad, "I can't get 'em in."

Hope Is Mainspring
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