

THE SMOKY YEARS

By ALAN LE MAY

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INSTALLMENT 15 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 opposi-

tion of his sweetheart, Jody Gordon, and her father. After breaking Thorpe in 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 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 looking for Jody when he accidentally met Wilce. Together they prepared to rescue her.

After that a full minute passed and stretched to a minute and a half. Evidently the outposts had been farther away from the cabin than Shoshone had calculated; but Roper heard none of them fire.

He thought, "If I can keep them interested just ten minutes more—"

Now a furiously ridden horse was coming up. Roper flattened himself against the wall beside the open door, and waited until he heard the man drop from his pony just outside. He stepped to the door, fired once; and a man crashed face downward upon the door sill itself to lie utterly motionless.

With his boot Roper pushed the inert heap off the door sill, so that the door might be closed at need. Because there were only two more shots in his gun, he picked up one of the weapons he had collected, and checked its loading.

"I'd stand real still if I was you," he warned the two who stood with their hands up. He fired one more shot between them, for purposes of general discipline. "I ought to kill you; maybe I will in a minute—haven't decided yet."

Now another horse was coming in fast; in another second or two it



"I'd stand real still if I was you."

The uncertain and flickering light of the little fire seemed to fill the room with ample light, compared to the heavy darkness without. A man who sat upon a keg by the fire sprang up, his clawed hand reaching out to a gunbelt that lay upon the crude table; but the reaching hand rose empty in a continuous motion as the man put up his hand. Three crude bunks ranged along the rear wall. From the first of these, the one nearest the fire, a man came out with his hands up; one of his arms was heavily bandaged, and its upward motion carried its sling with it.

He never knew which of the two men behind him sprang forward to smash him down; but he knew as soon as he knew anything at all, that a long time had passed—more time than he could afford to lose.

CHAPTER XXI

Now Shoshone, whose heel had kicked the door shut behind him as he came in, made a headlong dive into the second of the three bunks. In that instant the thing happened that Roper most dreaded, so that in a single split fraction of a second their chances were irrevocably hurt.

Nobody but an old range rider could have located in the dark the brush corral where Shoshone Wilce and Jody Gordon were supposed to wait for Bill Roper. What would have been a simple problem by daylight, in darkness became a test of scouting ability and cowman's instinct. Yet somehow, by the throw of the land, and by his deep knowledge of the habits of thought of cowmen, Shoshone Wilce nosed out that circular corral of brush, in a darkness so thick that he was uncertain he had found the landmark until he had touched it with his hands.

The barrel of Shoshone's .45 had crashed upon the skull of the man in the bunk almost in the same instant that the shot was fired. A lean hand, gripping a six-gun, dropped out over the side of the bunk, relaxed slowly, and the six-gun slid to the floor from long, dangling fingers. Shoshone Wilce held absolutely motionless for a moment, half crouched, then straightened slowly.

It took all her will power to restrain herself from breaking into a run, or from mounting her pony and racing him—where? Any place, if only her high-strung nerves could find expression in action. But she forced herself to lead her pony slowly, measuring her strides while the daylight increased.

"Shoshone—you hit?"

Then, as she completed the circuit of the corral, and came again to where Shoshone's pony stood, she saw that Shoshone Wilce no longer sat the saddle. At first she thought that he had tied his pony and walked away; but as she came nearer she saw that the little man was down in the snow, huddled against the rough brush of the corral barrier.

"It's only—" Shoshone began. His face was ghastly and his voice quavered; but when he had fully straightened it steadied again into the same dead flatness as before.

Jody Gordon said, fear in her voice. "If he doesn't come soon—if he doesn't come—"

"Bill! I thought they'd kill you!" She flung her arms about his neck and with the swift impulse of a child, kissed his mouth.

She sprang forward, calling out his name, and there was a meaningless, nightmarish quarter of a minute while her pony reared backward from the sudden jerk upon its bridle and had to be quieted before she could advance again.

The man nearest the table made a sidelong movement toward the holster gun that lay there; Bill Roper smashed a shot into the wall beside him, and the man jerked backward.

She was not asleep, but he did not answer. And now as she dropped to her knees beside him in the snow she saw that a bright trickle of red had traced a line from the corner of his mouth, crookedly across his chin.

"Shoshone, can you ride?"

"Shoshone!"

There was a curious strain in the flatness of Shoshone's voice. "I'm okay, I tell you."

"Germans Predict England Will Fold."—headline. Nonsense. It's been off the fold standard for months.

Bill Roper caught up a sheepskin coat with his free hand, and flung it over Jody's shoulders. "Get gone!" he snapped. "Shoot free the ponies! tie-ropes, and ride like hell! Here—take this!" He thrust the gunbelt from the table into Jody's unready hands. "I'll see you—where I said."

"I wouldn't worry about that, was I you," Roper said. He slammed another harmless shot over the speaker's head, interestingly close to the man's scalp. He needed a continued sound of action at the cabin to draw the outposts in, so that Shoshone and Jody Gordon would have their chance to get clear.



WHAT! NO NEW AUTO MODELS?

There is talk of discontinuing any changes in automobile models during this year, but the decision should not be made except as a last resort. Few things will break down the morale of the people more than a sudden suspension of their ancient right to trek down to the annual auto show and see how many gadgets have been shifted.

There is a limit to sacrifice. And it may be reached when you ask Americans to go through a whole year in which even the windows in automobiles open the same way they did before.

You can get Gus Q. Citizen to give up many things in a crisis without a squawk. He will give up meat, cut down on fuel, and if necessary climb into a uniform to defend his country, but when you ask him to take calmly the news that Detroit will turn out sedans with the humps and bulges unchanged, you're taking a chance on insurrection.

Elmer Twitchell is among those horrified by the prospect and he has written the following appeal to the President:

"Dear Franklin: "If you want the morale of America kept intact, do something at once to stop this idea of no changes in auto models during the emergency. Year after year, through floods, fires, dust storms, quakes, strikes, erosions and depressions, no matter what happened to the country, automobile models came out every season full of changes. The more trouble, the more changes. And the people of America are not going to feel that everything is all right if cars come out next fall with the starting button right where it is today, and with the gear shift not lowered, raised, hidden or camouflaged in any way.

"I think I could stand news of an American reverse in battle better than I could endure the sudden realization that the ash trays in our limousines were to be left as in the 1941 models, and that nobody had decided on a new type of bumper.

"Franklin, if we are to come through this great crisis okay, don't prevent those auto makers from monkeying with the gadgets, color schemes and front ends. It's little things like that that undermine confidence, kill causes and lose wars.

"Of course I want the auto industry to concentrate on defense, but it must make a few changes in the limousine and roadster models if we are to remain a happy people. See that the least they do is to keep shifting the doorknobs.

"Yours for unity and a harder search for the starting button every season, —Elmer Twitchell."

And we think Elmer is right. If the President doesn't do something, congress should.

FOOT NOTE

Some of our lady knitters— Their spirit can't be beat— Seem to think the British soldier Runs to large and lumpy feet.

Length and strength are featured Rather than the fit; Heaven help the British army In some of those socks they knit! —J. H. Niles.

We understand that the new movie "Hudson's Bay" had a tough time getting through under that title. A lot of Hollywood people wanted to call it "Bay Meets Girl."

The height of something or other: an advertisement by a racing tipster claiming "Positively no guesswork."

LAFAYETTE, WE ARE HERE! (Modern version.) From Rome they started out to fight Old Egypt's troops who wear the fez. And British soldiers in their might Who man the forts that guard Suez.

A quarter million strong they fare To Libya colony's gleaming strands, And thence to swarm by land and air 'Cross Egypt's leagues of desert sands.

Suez at last! No victory's throne! No flash of arms! No bugles, clear! Seventy thousand captives drone, "Mussolini, we are here!" —W. F. Dix.

PREPAREDNESS

Hi— I saw a fellow walking up and down a gangplank naked, blindfolded and wearing a roller skate on one foot and a greased pad on the other. When I asked, "What's the idea?" he replied, "I'm just getting myself into condition for the next depression." —Zoops.

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