

THE SMOKY YEARS

By ALAN LE MAY

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INSTALLMENT 16 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. Jody was captured by seven of Thorpe's men. Roper and Shoshone Wilce res-

cued her in a surprise attack. Shoshone and Jody rode to a prearranged spot, but Roper was captured while fighting a rear guard action. While waiting for Roper to meet them, Jody saw Shoshone fall down, dead.

CHAPTER XXII

"We're making a big mistake, not to hang him and be done with it," Red Kane said.

They were two days from Fork Creek now. This long and narrow room, which Jim Leathers paced so restlessly, was the kitchen of the main house at Walk Lasham's southwest camp—a convenient stop-over on the way to Sundance, where Roper was to be turned over to Ben Thorpe.

"The quicker we hang him, the better we'll be off," Red Kane said again.

Wearily, doggedly, Jim Leathers rolled a cigarette. He took his time about replying. "Seems like you already said that once before."

"I'm liable to keep on saying it," Red Kane told him. "Things is different now."

In the doorway, behind the two men who watched Bill Roper, a girl now appeared, a slim, full-breasted girl, whose dark, slanting eyes had sometimes troubled Bill Roper before now.

He had not been surprised to find Marquita here in Walk Lasham's southwest cow camp, to which his captors had brought him. He had guessed, when he had last talked to her in Miles City, that she was Walk Lasham's girl; and in spite of her expressed eagerness to leave Lasham and ride with Roper, he realized that Marquita still had to live in some way.

Girls of her stamp could not afford to throw down such a man as Lasham, until more interesting opportunities offered.

Her face was impassive now, but one of the slanting dark eyes narrowed in a definite signal to Roper. The combination of Spanish and Indian blood in this girl from the Tex border gave her a lithe, lazy grace, and a haunting depth of dark eyes; and the same blood made her unaccountable—sometimes stoic and smouldering, sometimes livened by the lightning flashes of an inner fire.

Undoubtedly she was capable of a passionate devotion, and an equally passionate cruelty. Anything could happen in a situation which included Marquita—with Marquita in love.

For a moment Bill Roper resented the fact that he couldn't be interested in any girl except Jody Gordon—a girl who didn't want him or need him. All the worst aspects of his own situation were apparent to him, then. He was an outlaw wanted the length of the Trail; probably would be an outlaw all the rest of his life, which gave every promise of being a short one. That even Marquita wanted him, or had any use for him, was a gift which he should have been glad to accept. What he had to think of now, though, was that Marquita was extremely likely to precipitate a lot of immediate disturbance.

Troubled, he wished to shake his head, or in some other way caution her that she must make no attempt to interfere. Roper had no intention of ever coming into the hands of Ben Thorpe alive. Somewhere between this place and Sundance, where Thorpe waited, he would make his play, however slim the chance.

Yet he would rather take his chances with some unforeseen opportunity later, when they were again on the trail, than to be plunged into some helpfully intended situation which the girl might devise—with danger to herself and questionable advantage to him. She had never brought him any luck.

He was unable, however, with the eyes of his two enemies upon him, to signal her in any way.

"Ben wanted him alive, if I could get him," Jim Leathers said stubbornly. "Well, I got him alive, and I aim to keep him that way. You burns ain't going to talk me into anything different just because you figure a dead man is easier to pack."

Bill Roper listened sardonically. In the two days spent in traveling from Fork Creek rendezvous, the scalp wound which had brought him down had nearly healed; but when he laced his fingers behind his head he winced and dropped his hands again.

It was typical of the quality of his captors that his hands were not tied or manacled. They told him where to sit and they made him stay put, and they were careful that no opportunity was given him to snatch a gun from an unwary holster; but these were merely the routine precautions of sensible men. For these riders were the picked gunfighters of Ben Thorpe's scores of outfits. They did not fear Roper, would not have feared him had he been armed.

Bill Roper had no doubt that Red Kane and perhaps one or two of the others would kill a doomed prisoner for no more reason than Jim Leathers had suggested.

The Lasham camp had been built with news as Jim Leathers' men had ridden in at dusk with their prisoner. Much had happened on the range while Leathers had waited out Bill Roper at the Fork Creek camp. The news that had reached

Lasham's southwest camp was broken, and seemed to have been little understood by the men who had brought it; but Roper, with his inside knowledge of the force he had turned loose against Lasham, could piece together its meaning well enough. Lasham's southwest outpost, with its big herds of picked cattle wintering in this deepest and richest of the Montana grass, had been more powerfully manned than any other Lasham camp. But twice in the past week frantic calls for reinforcements from the outfits to the east had drained most of this man power away—first five picked gunfighters, then a dozen cowboys more, until only five men had been left.

The messengers who had killed their ponies to come for help had brought the camp a fragmentary story which gave Roper the deepest satisfaction.

In their tales of incredible losses, of raiders who struck night after night at far separated points, driving cattle unheard-of distances to disappear weirdly in the northern wastes, Roper read the success of his Great Raid.

Dry Camp Pierce was sweeping westward across Montana like a destroying wind; by unexpected daring, by speed of movement, by wild



Dry Camp Pierce was sweeping westward across Montana.

riding relays which punished themselves no less than the cattle they drove, Dry Camp was feeding an increasing stream of Lasham beef into the hands of Iron Dog's bands, who spirited the beef forever from the face of Montana. By the very boldness of its conception and the wild savagery of its execution the unbelievable Great Raid was meeting with success.

And now Dry Camp had struck even deeper than Roper had planned, lifting the best of Lasham's beeves from almost within gunshot of Lasham's strongest camp. So well had Dry Camp planned, and so steadily did the luck hold, that a full day had passed before the loss inflicted by the raiders was discovered. The five remaining cowboys at the southwest camp were only tightening their cinches as Jim Leathers rode in.

Most of the Leathers party had joined the Lasham men in pursuit of Dry Camp's raiders. Only Jim Leathers himself and the unwilling Red Kane remained to convoy Roper to Ben Thorpe at Sundance.

Because of the confusion involved in the organization of the pursuit, the night was now far gone; already it was long past midnight.

"There's still another reason," Red Kane said, "why it would be better to hang him now. Suppose that wild bunch of his knows he's here?"

"How the devil would they know that?" Leathers said with disgust.

"Maybe they was scouting us with spy glasses as we come over the trail today."

"If they was, they would have landed on us right then, in place of waiting till we got into camp."

"Maybe the girl run to them—"

"The girl! You make me sick."

"Have it your own way."

"You're darned right I'll have it my own way. I don't want to hear no more about it. And I'll tell you this: if your trigger finger gets itchy while you're on watch tonight, you better soak it in a pan of water, and leave the gun be. Because if anything comes up while you're on watch such that you got to shoot him, by God, next thing you got to shoot me—you understand?"



"I guess it could be done," Red Kane said nastily. Leathers ignored this, and Red Kane disappeared. This time the door shut after him.

Leathers said, "Get me a drink." Marquita unhesitatingly set out a bottle and a glass on the table beside Jim Leathers' elbow.

"A deck of cards," Leathers said. She produced this, too.

Marquita strolled over to Leathers, the high heels of her slippers clicking lazily on the puncheon floor. "Why are you so cross with me?" she asked reproachfully. She moved behind Jim Leathers, and slowly ran her fingers through his hair.

"Ain't going to get you a thing," Jim Leathers said sourly.

"No?" said Marquita. For a moment one hand was lost in the folds of her skirt; then deftly, unhesitatingly, she planted the muzzle of a .38 against the back of Jim Leathers' neck.

There was a moment of absolute silence, absolute immobility. Jim Leathers' eyes were perfectly still upon Bill Roper's face, as still as his hands, in one of which a playing card hung suspended. But though his face did not notably change, Marquita, with her .38 pressed hard against the back of the gunman's neck, had turned white; her mouth worked as she tried to speak, and her wide eyes were upon Bill Roper in terrified appeal. Perhaps no more than a second could have passed in that way, but to them all it seemed as if time had stopped, so that that little fraction of eternity held them motionless forever.

Bill Roper, moving up and forward, exploded into action smoothly, like a cat. It was the length of the room between them that saved Jim Leathers then.

Leathers twisted, lightning fast. Marquita's gun blazed into the floor as her wrist swept down in the grip of Leathers' left hand; and Bill Roper checked a yard from the table as Leathers' gun flashed into sight, becoming instantly steady. Marquita sagged away from Leathers, and her gun clattered upon the puncheons; but although Leathers' whole attention was concentrated upon Roper, Marquita's wrist remained locked in his grasp.

The gunfighter's voice was more hard and cold than the steel of his gun; it was as hard and cold as his eyes.

"Get back there where you was," Bill Roper shrugged and moved back.

Leathers flung Marquita away from him and with his left hand picked up her gun as the door of the storeroom was torn open and Red Kane bulged in.

"What the—"

"This thing come behind me and stuck a gun in my neck," Leathers told him.

"The devil! You hurt?"

"Hell, no! I took it away from her."

Gently, tentatively, his long fingers ran over his wounded leg. That bullet wound in his thigh must have tortured him unspeakably through the two days in the saddle; and it must have been jerking at his nerves now with red-hot hooks, roused by the swift action that had preserved his command.

His face had turned gray so that the black circles under his eyes made them seem to burn from death's-head hollows, and his face, which had changed so little in this moment of action was relaxed into an ugly contortion. Slowly the gray color was turning to the purple of a dark and terrible anger.

"By God," said Red Kane, "I told you we should have hung him!"

"You told me right," Jim Leathers said. The burn of his eyes never for a moment left Bill Roper's face. "You was right and I was wrong. I should have hung him at the start."

A pleasurable hope came into Red Kane's face. "Well — it ain't too late!"

"No, it ain't too late. Tie his hands."

Keeping Roper between himself and Leathers, so that his partner's gun bore steadily upon Roper's belt buckle, Kane lashed Roper's hands behind him. The frost-stiff rope bit deep.

"Tie up this girl, too," Leathers ordered when Kane had finished. "I want her to see this show."

Marquita said, "I'm sorry, Bill." Her voice was broken by hard, jerking sobs, and tears were running down her face; yet somehow her words sounded dull and dead. "I did the best I could."

"You did fine," Roper said. "That was a game try." Hobbling on his stiff leg, Leathers moved to the outer door, flung it open; coatless, he stopped and signaled Red Kane back with one hand.

"Red, get back! Get out of line!" With the quick instinct of a man who has always been in trouble, Red Kane jumped back into the room, carrying Bill Roper with him. They all could hear now the sound of running horses.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



WHO'S NEWS THIS WEEK

By LEMUEL F. PARTON
(Consolidated Features—WNU Service.)

NEW YORK—There are many old-timers who won't like this war, when and if it comes our way. There will be no Captain Thorne, of the third act of "Secret Service,"

He Routed Hand Work in Army Communications getting the critical Morse message and no William Gillette about whom a drama of communications may be built. They scrapped the Morse, for good and all about two years ago. There's no more hand work in army communications.

These nostalgic thoughts were prompted by the participation of Maj. Gen. Joseph O. Mauborgne in the big doings at Fort Monmouth, N. J., recently, with a troop review by the general and an amateur play, "The Bottlenecks of 1941," and many other spirited goings on in which the general was prominently featured.

General Mauborgne, chief signal officer of the army, is the Thomas Alva Edison of aviation radio—in the army at any rate. It was in October, 1912, that the then Lieutenant Mauborgne installed the first radio set in an airplane, at Fort Riley, Kan. The army had 12 planes then, and aviation meant signal corps, with planes first conceived as primarily useful for observation and signaling.

Lieut. "Hap" Arnold, who later was to become head of the army air corps, flew one of the planes to Fort Riley for the installation. There was much excitement, all over the country, when Lieutenant Mauborgne's cumber-ome quonched spark radio set managed to wait a few signals eastward. There was still more excitement when, in 1914, the lieutenant achieved the first two-way communication between an airplane and a ground station.

He had started something there and came along with it, to today's miracles of aerial chatter. He attained his present rank September 15, 1937, having been for the previous year director of the radio laboratory at Wright Field. For 29 years his work has been an unceasing concentration on development and experiment in aviation radio. His career is one of many recent reminders of our possibly unsuspected high degree of preparedness in varied and highly specialized trained personnel.

SO FAR, Victor Emanuel has been thwarted in his lifetime ambition to win the Kentucky Derby and the Grap National. However, he

Emanuel's Planes scores in a speed competition which may chalk this day up in the big history book.

After all this wistful talk about the United States releasing a blizzard of airplanes if it ever could get into mass production, Mr. Emanuel's company, Vultee Aircraft, Inc., announces that it is swinging into the straight-line, conveyor-belt output which, in automobile production here, made all other countries just added starters. The system has been proven and the Vultee company says it will quadruple its production.

Most war talk seems to boil down to just about that possibility.

Mr. Emanuel has made a shift from finance to management, partly under circumstances over which he had no control, and management would seem to be the gainer. When in 1926, at the age of 28, he inherited the \$95,000,000 National Electric Power company from his father, the utilities field wasn't safe for amateurs. The company caught the acquisitive eye of the late Samuel Insull. But Mr. Emanuel started over again, building the United States Electric corporation and thereafter protected himself nicely in the clinches.

He was born and grew up in Dayton, Ohio, fount of aviation genius, and was educated in the University of Dayton and Cornell. His father was Albert Emanuel, utility financier.

Vic Emanuel's interests have been divided. He expatriated himself in England for a few years, having a wonderful time as master of the Woodland Pychley hounds. He bought the 800-year-old Rockingham castle and rocked the countryside with a party of about 1,000 guests—imported Americans and British nobility—which made the British generously admit they had never seen a real party before. Now he may show them something about making planes in a hurry, which probably interests them more than parties at this moment.

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SLIGHT MISTAKE

They boarded the Fifth avenue bus, a charming young lady and a handsome escort. Tenderly he assisted her as they passed through the doorway. The vehicle was jammed with other passengers and the escort looked anxious. Leaning forward he whispered to the young lady:

"Can we squeeze in here, darling?"

Every face in the bus was turned toward the pretty young lady and they noticed her blush, as she answered faintly:

"No, dear, wait until we get home."

It's a good AMERICAN CUSTOM SHOOTING FIREWORKS on Independence Day began July 4, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was signed. John Adams, a Signer, said: "the day should be observed with hilarity and the setting off of fireworks."

It's also a good American custom to relax on the Fourth of July (and every other day) with a man-sized, mild King Edward, America's most popular cigar.

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Habit is a cable; we weave a thread of it every day, and at last we cannot break it. — Horace Mann.

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Appreciation

I complained of having no shoes—until I saw a man with no feet.—Author unknown.