

THE SMOKY YEARS

By ALAN LE MAY

W.N.U. Release

INSTALLMENT 17 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 by 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. Both Thorpe and Lew Gordon placed heavy rewards upon Roper's head. He

was captured by Leathers and Kane, two of Thorpe's men. Leathers' girl, Marquita, loved Roper. She made a desperate but futile effort to save him. The men were preparing to hang Roper when they heard the sound of running hooves.

Bill Roper started to say, "Jody, how on earth—" Jody did not seem to see him; she appeared to be thinking only of the slim youngster whom the cowboy carried. The cowboy laid the limp figure on the floor of the kitchen, ripped off his own neckerchief and spread it over the youngster's face. Jody Gordon methodically shut the door. Then she dropped to the floor beside the fallen youngster, lifted his head into her lap, and gave way to a violent sobbing. The high-keyed nervous excitement that had sustained her through the hard necessities of action was unstrung abruptly, now that her work was done; it left nothing behind it but a great weariness, and the bleak consciousness that this boy was dead because of her.

Roper and the King-Gordon cowboy stood uncertainly for a moment. Then the cowboy picked up Leathers where he lay struggling for breath, carried him into the back room and put him down on a bunk. For a moment he hesitated; then closed the door between the two rooms, leaving Jody alone.

"Seems like the kid got Jim Leathers; but Jim Leathers got the kid."

"Daid?" Old Joe asked.

"Deader'n hell! Jody takes it awful hard."

The cowboy cut loose Bill Roper's hands, and together they lifted Old

Joe onto the other bunk. Roper cut Marquita free.

"Get me that kettle of water off the stove," Bill Roper ordered Marquita; and when she had brought it he said, "Now you go and keep Miss Gordon company for a little while."

Marquita left them, closing the door behind her.

Old Joe kept talking to them in a gassy sort of way, as they did what they could for his wound.

"The kid was scared to death to come. Jody seen that, and tried to send him back, with some trumped-up message or something. Naturally he seen through that and wouldn't go. Now most likely she blames herself that he's daid. Lucky for us that Leathers' main outfit wasn't here."

"You mean just you three was going to jump the whole Leathers outfit, and the Walk Lasham cowboys, too?"

"Not three-four," Old Joe said. "Don't ever figure that girl don't pull her weight. We been laying up here on the hill since before dusk. She aimed we should use the same stunt you used at Fork Crick—bust into 'em just before daylight. Then somebody fires off a gun down here, and she loses her haud, and we come on down. It was her smashed her horse against the door, trying to bust it in. She blindfolded him with her coat—threw it over his haud—and poured on whip and spur, and she bangs into the planks. Broke his neck, most like; can't see why she wasn't killed—"

"Just you four," Roper marveled, "were going to tackle the whole works, not even knowing how many were here?"

"We tried to tell her it couldn't be done. But you can't talk any sense into a woman, once she gets a notion in her nut."

CHAPTER XXIII

Marquita, closing the door of the storeroom behind her, for some moments stood looking down at Jody Gordon.

Jody still sat on the floor, upon her lap the head of the boy who had

downed Jim Leathers. The sobs that convulsed her were dying off now, leaving her deeply fatigued, and profoundly shaken.

"You might as well get up now," Marquita said. Her soft Mexican slur gave an odd turn to the blunt American words she used. "The fight's over; and that boy you've got there is dead as a herring."

With a visible effort Jody Gordon pulled herself together, and gently lowered the head of the dead boy to the floor. She got up shakily, and for a moment looked at Marquita.

"Why did you come here?" Marquita asked at last. Her voice continued gently curious—nothing more.

"I knew Billy Roper was alive," Jody told her. "Because I was watching when Leathers left Fork Creek with him. I already knew they meant to take him to Ben Thorpe at Sundance, for the reward. That would be death, to him. And I knew they meant to stop over here on the way. So I got the boys, from our Red Butte camp, and I come on . . ."

"You are a very foolish little girl," Marquita said. "Luck saved you; but if this camp had been full of men, it would have been suicide."

"Wouldn't you have done the same?"

Marquita shrugged impatiently. "I feel very sorry for you," she said. "Why?"

"Because I think you are in love with this Billy Roper."

"Why do you say that?"

"Es claro," Marquita said. "It is plain. And it's a pity; because this kind of man is not for you."

At first Jody Gordon did not answer. But behind the softness of Marquita's voice was a cogency as strange as her American words—a cogency that would not be ignored. Here Jody found herself facing a woman whom she could not possibly have understood. Marquita's careless, even reckless mode of life, her uncoded relationships with men—there was not an aspect of Marquita's life which did not deny every value of which Jody was aware. Marquita appeared to thrive and flower in a mode of life in which Jody incorrectly believed she herself would have died.

"I don't understand you." Marquita's glance swept the room—the bare chinked walls, the dead boy. Her glance seemed to go beyond the door, where they were dressing Old Joe's wound; beyond the walls, to the cold wind-swept prairie, where men still rode this night, though morning was close.

"What do you know," she said—"what can you know of the lives of these men?"

Jody lifted her head, then, and looked at Marquita; and again the simple words and the mask-like face of Marquita seemed to have a meaning for which she groped. In the silence that followed, it came to Jody that the night's fighting was not yet over, that she must still fight for herself and for Bill—and somehow for that foolish hero in Ogallala, with its tall tower overlooking the plain.

"Do you ride with them?" the gentle, inexorable voice went on. "Do you share their blankets? Do you ride under their ponchos in the rain? Where are you when their guns speak? Who prays for them at dawn, knees down in this God-forsaken snow?"

Marquita paused, and her body swung, lazily assured, across a shadowy angle of the room toward the closed door that had hid Roper, working now over the wounded men, the doorposts and it seemed to Jody, watching her, as if Marquita were a barrier between what might have been Jody's, and that she had lost now.

"You don't have to bar the door," she said.

Marquita's hands came away from the doorposts. "I know I don't." The words were so indolently candored that they might have been spoken in Spanish. And at their soft assurance something awoke in Jody Gordon. . . . Something was still worth fighting for. Perhaps it had nothing to do with Bill Roper, but it flowed deep into the roots of her life; deeper than her life with one man—with any man—could ever flow.

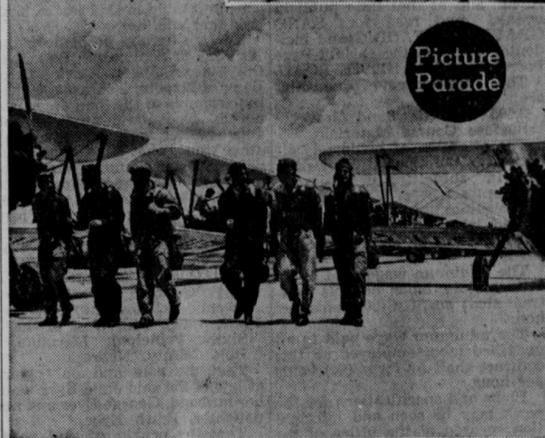
As Jody looked at Marquita, strange things came to her, that she herself could not have put into words. She knew that Marquita and all her kind would presently pass. Perhaps Bill Roper, like all the rest of his bold riders, must also pass; but now suddenly Jody knew that whatever else might vanish from this prairie, what she herself stood for would remain. When she spoke at last, she scarcely recognized her own voice. "I guess I was wrong," she said. Her words had a strange echo of Marquita's own directness. "You're Bill Roper's girl—is that what you wanted to tell me?"

The dance hall girl's words fell softly. "Si, that is what I wanted you to know."

R. A. F. Fledglings Train Here

This is John Staples of London. He is one of a hundred British boys being fashioned into pilots for the Royal Air Force at the Lakeland school of aeronautics. There are some 550 such students in the U. S. altogether, all of whom are getting expert training far from the bomb-rocked airdromes of the homeland.

Staples is typical of these sky fighters whose average age is 23. Air cadet Staples was given this Uncle Sam bunny mascot by Florida admirers.



Picture Parade

Young Britons who came to America because they wanted wings to fly and fight with the Royal Air Force are shown marching back to the hangars after an instruction flight.



Over in the bomb-cratered homeland they call it "tonic," but they like the pop they get in the canteen at the Lakeland school better than the home product.



Above: This is the cadets' first introduction to watermelon. Billie Jones, an expert, sub, is showing the Britons the proper technique in disposing of Florida watermelon.



Left: Students who are being fashioned into sky fighters for the R. A. F. take time out for play. Cricket is tops with them.



Marching to the mess hall for breakfast.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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