

# FLAME IN THE FOREST by Harold Titus

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WNU Service

## CHAPTER I

SMOKE filled his eyes and his throat. Heat, so intense that it seemed to be fluid, poured over them. The sound of the speeder's motor and the clatter of its wheels on the uneven rails was almost drowned in the raging voice of the fire; and Tod, an arm around him, holding him close as they rocked and swayed down the grade, was trembling.

But he wasn't going to cry, even if he was more scared than he ever had been in his seven years of experience. Not much, he wasn't! He hugged the precious letter-file with old Jack's pay-roll in it closer, and tried to look ahead; and when he saw living flames from the burning cars of chemical wood swept across the track like a curtain, he threw himself flat and squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath, and did not complain with so much as a grunt when Tod's big body, sprawling suddenly over his small one, made his ribs bend out of shape. No, sir! This was no time to act like a baby!

Headquarters was going, sure enough, but they were getting good old Jack's money out to safety. That was his job: to help save good old Jack from going bust. When you've got a job like that, for a man like that, you can't let on you're scared, can you? No; not even at seven, you can't!

He had been outside the office, standing in the deserted camp clearing, staring off up the road which Jack and the crew had taken before daylight, and where the cook had just gone with dinner for the fire-fighters, when the bookkeeper called to him.

"Listen, Kerry," Tod had said. "I want you to sit right here until I call you or come back. Wind's getting worse."

His big, ordinarily good-natured face was white, and fine beads of moisture pricked out above his eyebrows.

"Sure," said Kerry Young, and swallowed, his heart going faster with Tod looking so scared.

"Now, listen, careful. I took the payroll out of the cash drawer, see! It's in this letter-file—this one, right here." He laid his hand on the brown box on top of the safe. Another file was on the desk, and more on a shelf above it; but Tod put his hand right on that special one. "I'm goin' out to scout around. If anything happens, it may happen fast. The speeder's right on the track, now—right by the water-tank, there. If I yell, you bring the file and come a-runnin'. Understand that?"

"Sure, Tod," said Kerry, and swallowed again, even if his mouth was drier than ever.

"Good boy! Everybody's got to do his part, time like this."

He went out, then, and Kerry sat down on a chair with his breath fluttering in his throat. Responsibility sat heavily on his small shoulders, but he'd do just what Tod had told him to do. That payroll was old Jack's money, and he'd break his neck to help old Jack, he would! Good old Jack, who had found him in the house the day before his mother died, and got the doctor and did all that he could do, and who, after it was all over and he was alone, brought him to camp. That had been winter before last, and it looked as if he was going to stay with Jack forever. He certainly hoped so. Nobody in the world could be so kind to a little boy who had nobody else to look out for him as could old Jack, and breaking your neck for a man like that would be little enough to do.

Jack had been so worried since the fire started, day before yesterday! He had been in town when it came up, and had come back,

driving the engine himself, snaking the empties over the steel fit to shake the stakes out.

The crew was on the fire then, of course, and old Jack's voice, generally so good-natured, was sharp as a knife when he questioned Tod who was telephoning for more wardens. Jack stuffed the payroll money into the safe as he talked, and then, telling Tod certain things to do all in one breath, he jumped into the waiting buckboard and galloped to the southward, where a mile-wide front of slash fire advanced toward camp.

Kerry waked up when Jack came in that night. Their room was next the office, with a big bed and a little one; and he lay in his little one and looked through the open doorway and saw Jack standing by the desk, shirt all scorched, hair singed, talking lowly to Tod. It was bad, he said. He'd brought



"Kid, Which File Did You Bring?"

half the crew in to get some rest; he'd turn in himself and try to catch a wink, because with all that chopping afire, tomorrow was going to be hell itself. . . .

And tomorrow was, with the telephone ringing and help from town coming through all day, and the smoke thick and thicker.

But at breakfast this morning, eaten before the first crack of dawn, Jack had said:

"We got an even break, now. We'd ought to hold her, but you never can tell. Why, yesterday, some of them damn' birch stubs got burnin' clean to the top, 'nd I'll bet they was throwin' live brands half a mile ahead of 'em."

"And they might go further than that," Tod West commented.

They might, another said; not likely, but still they might and then Jack pulled Tod to one side where nobody but Kerry could hear and said:

"Since this thing broke I've thought no more about pay-roll than the boys have about pay day. Shows I'm gettin' old. You'll be here, Tod. Somebody with a head on 'em's got to stay by the telephone again. It ain't likely she'll get away from us. If she does, it ain't likely she'll get clean to camp in a hurry. But if anything should happen, you get that pay-roll into town. Silver's all right, but it's mostly bills and bills'd burn sure in that old safe of mine."

"They sure would," agreed Tod. Then Jack had looked at Kerry.

"Be good boy, son!" he said cheerily, as if he were only going out on the job and not to a fire line. "Be good boy,"—and tweaked Kerry's ear playfully.

"And him," he said to Tod, sud-

denly sober and jerking his head at the lad. "Twenty-two hundred, small as it is, 'd bust me right now, so get that out if anything pops. But him . . . If you get a chance, send him into town anyways." . . . So Kerry knew that Jack thought more of him than he did of going bust.

He sat there a long time, feeling important. It wasn't much that he could do for Jack ever, but now, watching that file, he knew that if fire should come into camp he'd grab that box and get to the speeder faster than he had ever gotten anywhere before in his life. He rose finally and looked through the window toward the water tank where the speeder waited. Tod West was just then coming up from the alders along the creek, looking around, in a funny way, as if he expected to see somebody or something alarming.

When, only minutes later, he heard Tod bawling his name, his heart went flippety-flop and almost choked him.

"Kerry! . . . Kerry! . . . A-runnin', Kerry!"

And he was running desperately, hugging the file against his belly.

He threw a look to his left where a streamer of thick, white smoke was coming up to mingle with the blue haze which had been drifting through camp for three days. Brush was on fire south of the barn.

Tod began trying to save the cook shanty and Kerry wondered why he didn't throw water on the office, which was in greater danger, but Tod, too, was terribly excited.

"She's goin'!" Tod yelled. "Old office's goin', Kerry!" His voice was funny, for all the world as though he were glad because the office was being licked by hungry, fast-devouring flames.

He did not start away at once. He stood there priming the motor slowly, spilling gasoline, because his hands shook so much. He kept his eyes on the office where flames were licking at the roof, eating into the hewn log sides.

"She's goin', Kerry!" he said and gave a queer laugh which made the boy wonder if grown men, also, sometimes laughed when they felt like crying.

He glanced at Kerry, then, and at the letter-file and licked his lips.

"Sure you got the right one?" he asked.

"The one you told me,"—stoutly. "We'd better haul, hadn't we?" "Just a minute, now!"

He waited, standing there and watching while a part of the office roof tumbled in. Only then

did he shove the speeder ahead until the motor caught and coughed.

And then they were zooming past the siding, and he screamed from the heat that beat upon him; opened his throat and yelled and writhed against the weight of Tod's body. Then, suddenly, the torture was past and he was half sitting up and they were hitting it down the grade.

Then he felt better and they were clicking over the switch points and here was town and the motor stopped and Tod West was calling out to somebody with a lot more excitement than he had shown back at camp that Jack's headquarters were burning.

A group quickly gathered, mostly old men and boys, because the best man power of town was out on the fire line, and they followed Tod and Kerry across the street to the bank.

They crowded into the bank and a man rose from his desk behind the counter.

"Jack's headquarters are gone," said Tod, handing the file to the man. "But we brought in the payroll. Did my damndest to save something of camp but I was alone. Kerry, here, lugged the money out of the office just in time."

"That's fine," said the banker, pressing the catch of the file. "That's sure lucky! I happen to know that if Jack should lose—"

He stopped short, then, and Tod leaned forward and the others pressed up close, attracted by the look on West's face, likely. It was a look that even a seven-year-old boy would notice.

"Why," the banker said, "why, Tod, it's empty!"

A moment of terrific silence followed and then Tod looked down at Kerry and said in a queer, unfriendly way:

"Kid, which file did you bring?" The boy swallowed, with a new sort of thrill running his small frame.

"Why," he said, "why, I fetched . . . You told me the one on the safe, Tod!"

The bookkeeper swore slowly under his breath and looked at the banker.

"Good God, I trusted him!" he said in a whisper.

The other clicked his tongue. "Oh-h!" he said, long-drawn. "But he's only a little boy," he added and slapped the file shut. "That surely is going to be tough for Jack!"

Kerry's knees were shaking and there seemed to be a vacant place in his middle.

"Tod, what's the matter?" he asked shrilly. "Tod, is the money back yonder? Did it burn up, Tod?" And then, summoning all his vigor, "Tod, I done just what you told me!"

West shook his head. "No, you didn't understand," he said in a moan. "You didn't understand, and the money's burned sure as hell,

and . . . My God, boys, it's my fault!"

Someone said: "It ain't your fault, Tod. The kid, he got rattled."

Another said: "It'll be all day with old Jack now!"

They all looked at the boy and he knew they were blaming him. All but Tod, Tod did not look his way; there was something funny about Tod's eyes.

His nostrils smarted and a lump swelled in his throat suddenly. A helpless feeling ran his bones and a sense of having been put upon, abused, outraged, Jack had gone bust because his pay-roll was burned up but he had done just as he had been told to do. . . .

And before he knew what he was doing, he was sobbing just that:

"I fetched the one you told me! I did! I did!"

He got that far before his voice choked him and he slunk to a corner, burying his face in his arms. Old Jack was bust and they said it was because he got rattled when he had done as he'd been told and tried his best to help!

## CHAPTER II

IT RAINED toward evening and Jack Snow got to town at dusk. He had heard about his camp, of course, but he had not heard about the loss of his pay-roll. And when they told him he said nothing for, perhaps, a quarter of a minute but in those seconds he aged. Before men had called him Old Jack because they loved him. . . . Afterward, he was an old man, in fact. The first thing he said after he knew the worst that had happened referred to Kerry. He looked at the boy and winked and managed a sort of grin and said: "But you're all right, son!" as if that were all he would admit as being of any importance.

And after that he said but little for days. He appeared to listen when people talked but if he heard he seldom answered properly.

Once he said to Kerry, when they were alone in their room at the mill boarding house:

"Tough, to let a couple thousand bust you. . . . But it was that close."

He managed to rustle enough to pay off the crew; that is, those who would take what they had coming.

He began to be feverish and talked at night in his sleep, holding the little boy close in his arms while the tremors ran through him.

Tod West came to say good-bye and declared again that it was his fault, that he should have fetched the letter-file himself.

Jack roused from his lethargy. "Fault, hell?" he snorted and spit the way he used to do. "You done your damndest, both of you!"

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