

FLAME IN THE FOREST by Harold Titus

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WNU Service.

SYNOPSIS

Kerry Young, a lad of seven, is prepared to flee the burning lumber camp of his benefactor, Jack Snow, who took the youngster to live with him at the death of Kerry's mother. Tod West has instructed Kerry to come with a file containing the camp's funds should it be endangered. Flames attack the office, and Kerry, hugging the precious file, and Tod race to town. Tod acts queerly. At the bank the file is found empty and Kerry is blamed with taking the wrong one. Snow, his headquarters and money gone, is ruined, and soon thereafter dies, leaving Kerry to the Poor Commissioner. Kerry suspects Tod and swears to even the score. In a St. Paul office Kerry, now in manhood, and an expert woodsman, learns of the whereabouts of West. Kerry rescues a lovely girl from a scoundrel, who proves to be West. Tod threatens to pauperize the girl, Nan Downer. She thanks Kerry and tells him of the robbery, and murder of her father and of Tod's advances. She is operating a lumber tract which her father had purchased from West. Kerry makes camp. At the general store in West's Landing, he finds Tod engaged in a poker game. Jim Hinkle, timber employee, loses heavily. Kerry exposes Tod's cheating and disarms him. The crowd is unconvinced of Tod's duplicity. Kerry identifies himself to West, who denies knowing him, and advises him to leave town. Nan tells Dr. Ezra Adams of Kerry's rescue of her from Tod, and of West's threat. Ezra, who is coroner, visits Kerry, and appoints him coroner's clerk. Suspicion of the murder had rested on Holt Stuart, employee of Downer, and upon Jim Hinkle, who was cleared by Tod. The doctor has the fatal bullet and the serial numbers of the stolen bills, one of which has just been paid to Adams. It came out of the poker game. Tod orders Jim to run Kerry out of town. Kerry discovers he is being spied upon by a 'breed. Jim comes to Kerry with a warning to clear out. Kerry answers with a laugh. Nan hires Kerry. Young rescues Jim's daughter from drowning. While in the water, Frank Bluejay, the 'breed who had spied on Kerry, had tried to drown Kerry. Young settles with him.

CHAPTER VI—Continued

The impact of his body on the stream made a mighty splash. He came up immediately, shaking his eyes clear and treading water.

"Wh-what you t'ink you doin', eh?" he gasped. "What you—"

"I think I knocked you loose from yourself as a beginning!" Kerry said hotly. "And I'm standing here to wait for you to come up again. I'll knock you in as fast as you come up, Injun. . . . That's, if you come up on this side. If you want to keep out of trouble with me, you swim yourself across yonder and stay there! Get that! Stay there!"

"Ho! So you t'ink—"

With a defiant curse the man started swimming for the forbidden shore, and Young, hitching at his belt, followed slowly along the trestle, ready for a second encounter. But Bluejay had not gone far, looking upward at that dark and infuriated face, when he hesitated, spat angrily and turned, striking out for West's Landing, swimming like an otter.

CHAPTER VII

A JOB and some enemies, and at least the beginnings of some friendships.

Young pondered those possessions as he spent a drizzly afternoon making his camp permanent. And after dark, as he sat in Nan Downer's office and talked to her and Holt Stuart, he wondered just where this quick-spoken, high-strung youth was going to fit in with his scheme of things.

Holt appeared to him as one who will normally come to rapid decisions; form, perhaps, snap judgments. And yet Kerry had the feeling that in his case the forester was holding back, reserving his estimate and opinion.

When Holt's eyes rested on Nan,

a hunger of long standing appeared in them. Not the lust that had been on Tod West's face yesterday afternoon up river, but a clean, upright respect . . . and something deeper than that.

Stuart withdrew after a time, leaving Nan and Kerry alone. The door to the great lounging room of the headquarters was open. Logs smoldered on the hearth there.

"It's damp," the girl said; "let's finish our talk near the fire."

So she curled in a massive arm-chair on one side of the hearth while Young sat opposite her and continued the talk of the job. Tip, with a sigh of contentment, stretched on his side before the fire, and when a pause came in their discussion of timber estimates and mapping the girl's eyes rested on him.

"What a lovely creature!" she murmured and the retriever, opening one eye, rapped his tail as if understanding and appreciating the compliment.

Nan and Kerry laughed and Tip stretched and sighed luxuriously and flopped his tail again.

It was late when he left Nan, an agreement reached and ready to report in the morning to work at the big drafting board.

He had not gone far when he felt Tip come a bit closer, and then a vague figure detached itself from the shadow of a pine tree.

The hall, when it came, though cautious and low, was not unfriendly.

"Young? That you, Young?"

"Yo! What's up?"

The other approached and then Kerry halted.

"It's Jim Hinkle, Young."

"Oh, hullo, Jim! How's the girl?"

"Fine! All right!" — looking about cautiously. "I . . . wonder if I could git you to stop here a minute? I got somethin' I got to say to you, Young!"

He was wholly sincere, and not at all at ease. That billigerence which had been on display early in the morning was wholly gone.

"Well, when a man's got to talk . . . why, he's just got to talk, hasn't he?"

"I . . . I don't want certain parties ever to know I hunted you up, friendly-like."

"I'd be a skunk if I didn't say it, after what you done for us. I ain't even thanked you yet for givin' Elsie back to us." His voice shook. "That's all I can say about that . . . that I thank you. . . ."

"That's all right, Jim. You needn't even have said that much."

"Oh, yes! I had to say that. But that's the smallest part of it. I . . . I got other things to say, Young."

"I'm no good, you know. I'm a hell of a citizen. I drink and I gamble and I don't pay attention to my debts like I ought. I don't amount to nothin'. But it's only when somethin' happens like happened to-day that I git thinkin' about it much."

"And I got this to say . . . because of the things I've been thinkin' this afternoon; I was lower'n a snake's belly to come to you like I did 'nd try to drive you out of this country!"

Pause.

"You see it's different, now. I . . . That is, I come to you just after sunup like I . . . like I believed what the rest of 'em believe: that you framed up somethin' on Tod."

"And you knew all along that it was real? That he did cheat?"

Another pause. Then, "Yes!"—in a whisper.

Something unusual here.

"And you figure I am in danger now; and you figured the same way this morning. Then the change is all in you, Jim? In your . . . your attitude, I might say?"

"I guess that's gettin' clost to it."

Young scratched his head and took a deep breath.

"It's a little deep for me," he laughed.

"Ain't it what a man thinks that counts more than what he does?" In Hinkle's voice was a sort of passionate plea for understanding.

"Yes; I guess you're right."

"You see, Young,"—grasping the front of Kerry's slicker and looking quickly about,— "I didn't want to come to you today! I knew you caught Tod dealin' crooked, even if I didn't dare let on to him 'nd the rest. But I had to make you think I didn't owe you anythin'. That's what makes me feel like a skunk!"

"Oh, I see. . . . Yes, I see how it is. . . . So it was necessary for you to make that play this morning. That it, Jim?"

Almost reluctantly, the man said: "Yes; that's it."

"I'd say that was a queer fix for a man to get himself into."

"I told you I wasn't any good."

"But you were wrong. You are some good; a lot of good, I'd say. If you weren't, you wouldn't be waiting for me here tonight to try to fix up what you've broke!"

"Well . . . It ain't nothin'. It's all I can do."

Young shook his head. "No, you can do quite a little more. You can tell me, for instance, why you



"Then Why Has He Got Anything On You?"

thought it necessary to believe what West said instead of what your eyes told you."

"He amounts to a lot around here, Tod West does."

"And you don't dare cross him?"

"Not much. . . . God, Young, if you only knew!"

"I'm here; I'm ready to listen."

"But I can't tell you! It's nothin' that concerns you. It's nothin' you know about."

He had started to back away. Kerry, mind clicking smartly, realized that here was perhaps an outside chance to learn more of Tod West than he could learn from any other source. He pressed his advantage.

"It's something that concerns you, though, Jim. It's something that makes you . . . well, that keeps you under West's thumb? That it?"

"Or his heel!" The man's voice shook.

"You've had a lot to think about today. You've made an about-face and have come clean with me on one detail. Now wouldn't it be the smart thing to carry right on? To put yourself in a position where you could look any man in the eye and say what you think and feel?"

Jim laughed harshly. "As if I could! And what if I tried?"—des-

perately. "What if I tried? You think I want to find myself locked up and—"

His intentness had overridden his best judgment.

"Go on, Jim. Locked up. For what?" The man was adamant, refused to talk, so gently, firmly. Kerry began arguing, urging for confidence, playing on the fundamental decency in Jim Hinkle's heart.

"I can't! I can't!" he burst out. "You don't know Tod West! Why, to get what he wants he'd as soon charge an innocent man with murder as not! There! I've said it!"

"Murder?"

"Yes, murder! If I'd try to get out of doin' what he wants me to do, they'd have me in jail like that,"—snapping his thumb,— "and charged with killin' Miss Nan's father!"

"But you were suspected, weren't you? I've heard the story."

"Yes, I was. And if it hadn't been for Tod West, Nat Bridger, the sheriff, 'd've took me sure as hell!"

"But when Tod told them he played cards with you—"

"That settled it."

"And if you had been playing cards with him all that evening . . . Then why has he got anything on you?"

A long moment of silence followed.

"Because all I know about what happened that night is what Tod told me," said Hinkle at last.

Young gave a long-drawn, "Oh-h-h!" After a moment he added: "So that's it."

"Yes, that's it!" — desperately. "That's it, and he's bearin' down on me 'nd holdin' it over me like a club!"

"That sounds goofy, Jim. He all-bled you out of suspicion. He's on record with his story, isn't he?"

"But a man with his standin' can admit that he told a certain kind of lie 'nd get away with it, can't he? He could go to 'em 'nd say that he didn't think at the time, I had anything to do with th' killin', so he went to the front for me; but that it's worried him since and that things 've happened to make him believe that, mebbe. I might not be as straight as he thought I was last November. He could do that, couldn't he?"

"Yes, he could; of course he could. But how would that put you in wrong with the sheriff?"

"All he'd have to tell 'em," Jim said, "was what he swears to me 's the truth 'nd they'd put it on me just as sure as hell!"

"You mean that you weren't at West's house that night? That you didn't play cards with him that evening?"

"I stayed there, sure enough. Leastwise, I woke up there. But when I come in, I dunno; what I'd done before that, I dunno; 'nd if I played cards, I dunno that, either!"

"Good Lord, Jim, that doesn't sound so good, does it? What was it that really happened?"

The man drew a tremulous sigh. "Damned if I know; that is, what happened between 'bout sundown that night and the next mornin'. . . . I don't know any more about that 'n you do, Young."

"You see, I'd had a run-in with Cash the day before. He wasn't an easy man to work for; we'd had a run-in and he fired me 'nd got pretty rough about it, which was his way. A job was a job and I figured I'd had a raw deal 'nd didn't know what I was goin' to do last winter . . . and I lost my head. I told him I'd get back at him some way, and a lot of others heard me."

"I was broke. It was the time when deer-hunters was comin' in to make their camps just before the season opened. A lot of 'em allus stop at the Landin' to buy their grub. I hiked out to four of 'em to pick out a good campin' spot and to work up firewood for 'em. I took my rifle along 'cause I thought mebbe I might knock a buck over."

He paused and looked about and

listened, and then went on rapidly. "Well, I got 'em all right, on Big Beaver. They was lads and paid me well; they had a lot of booze and give me a bottle and I started back on foot 'bout sundown for the Landin', and that's the last I know until 'mornin', when I woke up in Tod's."

"He woke me up, see? He told me, then, that Cash'd been killed. He just said that: 'Cash was murdered last night.' And then he asked: 'Where was you, Jim?'"

"I didn't know where I'd been, Young. I knew I'd been wanderin' round somewhere with a rifle. I knew I'd been awful dam' mad at Cash. I . . . I just didn't know anything more than that!"

Hinkle strained to swallow, his breath quick and audible.

"I lost what little head I had, I guess. I went down on my knees to him; I begged him to tell me where I'd been, how I come there. I was scared, I tell you!"

"He told me to brace up. He didn't know where I'd been, he said. He'd found me wanderin' along the siding late in th' evenin'."

"Nobody knows just when Cash was killed but, as West tells it, that was probably some little time afterward. He set there and figured it all out. The ground was froze hard as iron; there wasn't any snow except in the timber. Whoever did the job left no sign, and if it wasn't told around that I'd been out alone, drunk, and with a loaded rifle, nobody'd suspect me. So he said he was always ready to go to the front for a friend, and framed up a story 'bout my playin' cribbage with him . . . in his room, upstairs, where he had a stove."

"I ain't no killer, Young! I never wanted to hurt a man, serious, I've figured and figured over this thing. It's most drove me crazy sometimes! I was pret' sore at Cash but . . . God, Young, I wouldn't 've killed him, sober; I wouldn't 've done it!"

He ran an unsteady hand over his face.

"And no one knows that you did."

Young, with a host of ideas and theories and suspicions crowding his mind, wanted to be alone, now.

"It's fine of you to act this way, Jim," he said. "I'm not going to forget it. And don't you worry."

"You won't whisper it?"

"Not to a soul!"

Hinkle drew a breath of relief.

"Well, I'll be gone, then. I . . . I'll see you again. And about Elsie . . . God, Young, you'll never know!"

CHAPTER VIII

NOW as Kerry Young walked on alone through the fine rain, that mental snarl which Jim Hinkle's confession had occasioned straightened out into this simple fact:

If Jim had not a lawyer-proof alibi to absolve him from suspicion in the Downer matter, then the whereabouts of Tod West on that fateful night were also open to speculation.

Hinkle was no killer. Despite the man's misgivings of self, Kerry was convinced that, drunk or sober, he would will no serious harm to even his worst enemy.

And last night, Ezra had said, the first piece of money from the Downer loot had made its appearance; had made its appearance in a poker game in which Tod West sat cheating.

He stood still, digesting these simple but astounding implications.

If West had not played cribbage with Hinkle, he might have been anywhere that November evening. If West were in possession of the money for which Cash Downer had been murdered, that would be a fact to arouse the official interest of a coroner's clerk, for certain.

And, added to these, was this item: that Tod West had been going armed for no one knew how long.

(TO BE CONTINUED)