

FLAME IN THE FOREST by Harold Titus

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CHAPTER XIII—Continued

On this, something like relief flickered in West's eyes but it was of short duration. This Young was not the sort of man who flees in the face of as flimsy a charge as had been placed against him. He had hoped at the most to keep Kerry in safe confinement until Bridger and the prosecutor could perfect a case against Holt Stuart which would forever remove from his own breast those cancerous fears. But now . . .

"Gone, eh?" he muttered. "Well, you've been made a monkey of by him. How'll folks think of that when they go to vote for sheriff again? I tell you, Bridger, you got one chance: that's to start things movin' against Stuart and not let 'em stop!"

"Well, I'm tryin', ain't I? But what can I do when Ezra's sittin' on the evidence?"

"Then you better use what you call your mind 'nd drum up somethin' to make Ezra string along with you!"

"But the law's with the coroner!"

"To hell with the law. . . ."

They argued aimlessly at length and when Bridger was gone Tod West paced the room and that fine beading of sweat pricked out on his forehead again.

"Damn!" he snarled. "Damn . . . damn everything!"

Jim Hinkle was on his way out toward Shoestring again before mid-forenoon. He yawned as he drove and his eyes were inflamed. But he drove one of Nan's cars rapidly into town and turned eastward and made better time on the highway. He went into the third town before he stopped at a telegraph office and thrust across the counter the message that Ezra Adams had entrusted to him.

"State Police Headquarters," the operator read aloud and then mumbled the rest. . . .

CHAPTER XIV

IT WAS sundown, now, with a cool mantle of evening descending on the forest.

"Tough luck, chum!" Kerry muttered to Tip as he finally gave up hope and turned away from his bee box. "They've called it a day. . . . But we can't be far off, now, and unless it rains tomorrow . . ."

He found a down maple and under its sheltering bole spread his blanket finally and, rifle handy, dog beside him, stretched his tired body. Rain began to fall and in the distance thunder rumbled. His thoughts turned to Nan, to Ezra and Holt; then to West. He drew a long, uneasy breath. . . .

He would have been a trifle more at peace had he known that a car, bearing two men, whirled into Shoestring from the southward, lights glaring with intensified brightness in the downpour. It came to a stop before a gas station and one of the occupants, slicker clad, leaned out: "What's the road to West's Landing?" he asked the boy.

"First to the left and straight on. Twenty miles. Look out for the culverts if the creeks is up!"

"Thanks!"

The car pulled away and the one who had asked directions said to the driver:

"Don't you want me to take her, Sergeant? You've had a long trick at that wheel."

"Mebby so. You've napped. No tellin' what this old coot of a coroner'll have on the bill for us when we get to him."

The rain was heavy but of short duration. Stars appeared, the rumble of thunder retreated and when the sun rose to warm and dry the land, insect life had resumed its activity and Young, biting hard

on his pipe stem, carried his bee box forward, set it down and carefully liberated the confined workers within.

"We're close, Tip!" he muttered. "Close and closer! Look at 'em!"

Dozens of bees swarmed about the box, buzzing shrilly. And an hour after the first visitor had called for his portion of honey, Young stood at the foot of a gnarled beech tree, staring upward at the old scar in the trunk, twice as high as his head, watching the come and go of workers through the hole that gave access to the tree's hollow heart.

Man sign was there in plenty. Yonder, a white pine had recently been blazed and pitch globules glistened in the sunlight. Brakes had been trampled down; here a seedling maple lay crushed into the duff, its leaves not yet wilted.

At the base of the tree lay a saprophyte which, until recently, had been growing on the scarred portion of the trunk. He could see where the bracket-like growth had been attached, two feet above the ground. He picked up the fungus and on its pale, tan velvety surface showed the print of a heel, even to the nails, dark brown against the buff. Some man had used that bracket in starting to climb that tree!

On his knees, he searched. The rain had not struck here with great force. Small bits of bark and lichens, with a fresh look, were there. The protruding end of a small limb, long since dead and all but absorbed by the expanding trunk, bore bits of thread, as if a garment had been scrubbed over it. . . . Yes, someone had climbed this bee tree.

Honey and money! . . . Money and honey!

Yonder went a trail; faint, yet readable to Young's eye. Not a game trail, either; he found the illy defined outline of a boot sole there. Stooped over, he followed. Broken, withered brakes told that someone had gone this way weeks before; broken brakes, still fresh, attested to a more recent passing.

The sign ended before a pair of limestone boulders, tilted together, forming a small cave.

"Oh—oh!" Another stone had been set against this opening once; now it was gone, rolled yonder.

He lay on his belly and shot his flash-light into the small cavern. . . . Granules glistened on the stone; he touched them with his finger and looked closely. Black, brittle, glittering flakes they were. . . . Lacquer from a japanned box?

His mouth was very dry, now, and he rolled quickly to his side to stare at the tree. A box the size of the one he had dug up yesterday never could have been concealed in the hollow of the beech; the opening was too small. But a box had been hidden here, and a man had climbed the tree. . . . And honey had daubed the man who handled both box and crowbar. . . .

"I'm a son-of-a-gun!" he cried. "I'll be a . . ." And on his feet there his face showed, for just an instant, a flash of admiration for the ingenuity which had laid out this course. . . . In the course he now suspected actually had been followed.

He had been right about the cabin on Townline. It was a short mile there and he covered the distance at a jog trot, Tip close behind. He halted at the edge of the clearing to look and listen and then went forward without hesitation.

From an insect net above one of the bunks, he cut a portion; he found a pair of old leather gloves; a workman's denim jumper; a hank of stout cord. From the tool cache he took an ax, a cedar saw, a splitter and two wedges. These, with

his rifle, made a burden of consequence and by the time he reached the tree again sweat bathed his excited body.

From the netting he improvised a veil, adjusting it over his hat and tucking the edges into the neck of the jumper. He put on the gloves, tied the jumper sleeves tight about his wrists and picked up the ax.

"Tip. . . . Yonder!" He gestured in command. "Away back and lie down! There's going to be a lot of hostility here in a minute!"

He waited until the dog had obeyed and then sent the bit of the ax deep into the beech.

He was right about the hostility. Not a half dozen blows had been struck before they were upon him in a cloud, buzzing angrily, seeking ways through his veil and garments for countless stingers. But Kerry was well protected and swung his ax steadily, eating a great gash in the trunk. Oh, one or two got to his wrists, and now and again he felt a burning prick on the shoulders when his jumper stretched tight. But that was as nothing, in this interval of suspense.

The tree sagged and shivered. It snapped and swayed. He struck three more swift blows and stepped back as it came down with a mighty, swishing roar and crash.

He had dropped the ax as the beech toppled. Now he took up the saw and, standing in a cloud of furious bees which hovered over the entrance to their fallen storehouse, he sent the teeth singing through the stout wood. Swiftly, his supple body swung to and fro, stoutly his long, strong arms drove the avid blade. The forest rang with the sound. . . . Rang with the sound which would have covered even the noise made by a frantic man, crashing through brush, running intently, breathlessly, his hat gone and face scratched and clothing torn.

No, the man was not close enough to have the sounds of his progress reach Young. But he was close enough to hear the ringing echo of that saw. He drew a hand across his face to wipe away the blood and the sweat and tried to still his breathing to listen. His trembling lips shaped a word and then he went forward, cautiously, walking like a cat, rifle held at ready. . . . As he approached the source of those other sounds, which had now changed from that of sawing to blows of a sledge on metal, he bent forward a trifle and went even more slowly, more quietly. . . .

West's Landing and its environs had experienced two long evenings and one long day of an excitement pitched to a point never before attained there.

And now the second day was beginning. Work was forgotten where it could be and before Mel Knight's store was gathered a group which argued and debated and orated and broke short anything it happened to be saying when another arrived, just on the chance that he would be the bearer of fresh incident.

Holt Stuart was in jail. Nan Downer, it was said, had brought in a lawyer from outside yesterday and the three had been together in Nat Bridger's office for long but no attempt to secure Stuart's release had been made as yet.

Kerry Young had escaped during the first night of his imprisonment and not been heard from since, though the search was frenzied.

Frank Bluejay was gone somewhere in his rattling, tattered flivver and men combed the blueberry country for sign or word of him.

And across at Downer's headquarters, old Ezra Adams sat behind the locked door of Nan's office with the articles he and Young had

brought from Townline, refusing to budge, denying Bridger admittance, waiting for something . . . one knew not what!

Oh, it was something to talk about, all right, all right!

Tod West had been in and out, saying little, going into long, heated but confidential talks with the sheriff.

And now came young Logan DePriest, walking across the trestle from Downer's. He was a lad with mild blue eyes and pimples on his face and fuzz on his chin.

"Well, Logan, you got it all settled over there?" a wag asked.

"Dam' right! Dam' right we have!" the youth replied importantly.

Something about his manner tugged at the interest of those who heard and saw, and yet . . . Logan was not to be taken seriously.

"I s'pose you've found Young 'nd Bluejay 'nd know what Ezra's got hatchin', eh?"

"Dam' right! Dam' right, I do!"

"A lot you know!"

"Betcha I know more'n any of you uns! Betcha million dollars, I do!"

"Take you. Bring out the million!"

"You think you're funny! Well, lemme ast you this: you know who them dudes was that druv into our place after th' rain las' night! You don't? I know dam' well you don't! Well, I do. . . . One of 'em 's a corporal 'nd one of 'em 's a sergeant 'nd they're detectuffs!"

"Gwan!" So commented one, but others lost their smiles and drew closer.

"Betcha two million! You know it all, you do! Betcha five million!" He spit and nodded. "Why, Miss Nan, she gits me up to put their car away, she does. 'Nd after I'd done it, I seen 'em all in th' office. I walked by 'nd they was standin' there, Ezra 'nd Miss Nan, 'nd th' detectuffs, 'nd had a box 'nd a crowbar 'nd a tin cup on th' table. They had a coal oil lamp there 'nd was all bent over, cause th' storm put th' lectric lights out; all bent over th' table 'nd sayin' as how they couldn't do nothin' 'til mornin'."

The scoffers, now, were even edging closer, and another had come from behind young DePriest: Tod West, this, halted in his evident intent to enter the store, looking, listening.

"Well, this mornin' them detectuffs was up early," the boy continued. "'Nd what'd they do?' Cunningly, he looked about, enjoying immensely this moment of importance. "They start blowin' powder on 'at ole crowbar, 'nd stickin' black tape over th' powder 'nd showin' it to Ezra."

"Th' sergeant, he's th' boss. 'Nd he says to Ezra; th' feller who handled th' crowbar 's th' fella who left his thumb print inside th' box. 'Nen they picked up 'at ol' tin cup 'nd went to work on it, blowin' powder 'n' they says to Ezra 'at if th' prints on 'at ol' cup's th' same's th' others, they c'n git their man by reachin' out fer him!"

He looked around again.

"Jus' now, 'at was," he declared. "Jus' now, they're blowin' powder on 'at ol' tin cup. . . ."

The group pressed close and closer but it had one less member, now; one less, because Tod West was running blindly toward his house.

The spruce forest grew close to the back door of his house. It was but a moment's work to secure his rifle, a supply of ammunition, and then disappear through the trees. Panting, he fled up-stream and crossed in gravel shallows and plunged through the bush northward.

He had a gun and food for its chamber. He knew where he could get an ax. With an ax and a gun a man may live in the woods for long, provided he knows the woods and their ways. Tod West knew that vast country beyond Townline lake better than did any other. He could hide there, could remain in safety for weeks, for months. He could not, of course,

stay forever; and when he emerged he would need more than an ax and a gun. He would need money. On his way up to his sanctuary he could retrieve more

CHAPTER XV

UNDER the driving of wedges the tree split and halves rolled apart at Kerry Young's feet. A great mass of brood and comb and oozing glistened in the sunlight.

Young moaned as he dropped his sledge and tore into the comb with his gloved hands, wrestling that sticky mass the cylindrical shaped object his quick eyes had detected. Honey dripped from his bees swarmed about his hands as he turned it over and over.

"What a place!" he muttered. "No mouse could gnaw, no porcupine bear find it. Nothing, West, except the bees knew! And who'd hunt for this? Who, if you hadn't left honey stickin' to that old crowbar?"

He shook off a bee which stung his wrist. He moved away from a buzzing cloud, springing his way the leaf dappled morning and, plunged the smeared roll of bills into the crystal water.

The honey washed away quickly dissolving even in the cold water. He saw a figure on the current. It was a hundred; many more were there. . . . He washed them quickly and Tip came close.

"Got it, Tip!" he cried. "Got it, Nan's cash! We've . . ."

Young whirled, then, because a dog had turned, stiff and alert and opened his throat in a sharp growl. In the soft earth, Kerry's one foot slipped and he had started to fall over as a rifle started to throw himself over his own rifle, leaning against a boulder. . . . That other weapon had and he went down with the apples of hell itself tearing at his shoulder.

So it was Tip who rushed to West, who charged forward as a man emerged from the brush and at ready. . . . Tip who, with his showing, and eyes wicked with orange flare, stood alone before Nan Downer's money and the man who had cached it so cunningly!

Again the rifle cracked and a dog, yelping, snapping at his hind leg, went end over end through the underbrush, throwing rolling, screaming with pain as West charged past him. . . .

Young had fallen face down in the muck about the spring. His right hand lay limply in the mud and away from it, rocked by a little ripples which still disturbed the surface, floated the roll of bills turning slowly around and around.

West saw the money. With a oath he snatched it up and pushed a fresh cartridge into the chamber. He poised there above the figure of his Nemesis, dropping the muzzle quickly to the back of his bared head.

And then caution asserted itself. How far behind pursuit might Tod did not know. Already had fired twice, and sounds were carry well today. He stopped, listening. The pound of his heart the rasp of his own breath were loud. He lifted Young's arm and let it go. The inert hand smacked the water dully.

Then, with cruel craft, he placed his foot against Young's chest and shoved his face down into the spring and leaped the low pool.

"Breathe 'nd drown, damn you!" he growled shakily and set off a slow run. . . .

It was the tugging of the spring dog on his collar which Kerry. He stirred and gulped and gasped. With a herculean effort he raised his head and half rose over; then dropped it to the ground and lay there moaning lowly. Should not be there, he knew, had something to do; something to go; a matter to attend. . . . Things were so far away, so faintly outlined, so . . .

(TO BE CONTINUED)