

FLAME IN THE FOREST

by HAROLD TITUS

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CHAPTER XV—Continued —16—

Tip's tongue was frantic against his closed lids; Tip's breath hot in his own nostrils. Consciousness came back with a nauseating surge. "Oh, God!" he moaned, getting his knees somehow beneath him. "Oh... It's gone... Tip! It was West... It was... And he's got it!"

Fighting down sickness, shaking his head against blindness, he searched. The money was gone. The money was gone! Tears coursed his cheeks as he shouted that at Tip and then stopped, leaning close to see better as the retriever licked savagely at his thigh.

"Oh!" he gasped. "And he almost got you!" With his good right hand he touched the creature's leg. "Broken!" he muttered as Tip winced. "The two of us... And he's making his get-away with Nan's money!"

A great and godly rage shook him, lifted him above pain, above dizziness for the moment.

"Tip, it's up to us! Shy an arm, shy a leg... Which way, Tip?"—reaching for his gun and sobbing. "Which way? Come... Hie... Here!"

Footprints in the muck gave him a lead. He walked bent over, following the sign in the soft forest mould, dog on three legs, whimpering with hurt, at his heels.

"Up to us..." he panted. "... us cripples... Hie on, Tip!" The dog looked into his face and, with a moan, dropped his muzzle to the ground, sniffing. He reeled as he lurched along; his tongue lolled but he was trailing and his tail was up!

Young began to laugh, a bit crazily.

"The old dauber's up!" he gasped. "It's still up... He can't beat us, chum! Not on your life."

He reeled along after the dog. Now and then he could see the trail himself; at other times sickness engulfed him, the trees swung and tilted crazily, he could scarcely see Tip. But he kept on, up a gentle rise, out onto a limestone ridge...

Tip was snuffling wildly, there, tall motionless. Then he found what he was following again. With a whimper, half of pain, half of delight, he staggered forward, his master, dragging the rifle by its muzzle, close behind.

Kerry walked that way for a month, a year, a generation. He fell and cut his lips. He bumped into a tree with his wounded shoulder and screamed from the pain. Tip looked back and stopped and waited. When the man got up to him again he went on, trailing like a hound!

Time and distance and pain meant nothing... until they came to a stop. Perhaps it was the respite from the effort of movement, perhaps the imperative demand for alertness from deep in him that brought Kerry slowly out of that numb state... Anyway, he saw that they had come to a clearing and he was halted on its edge, Tip, nose uplifted, before him. A building was swimming before his eyes, like a moving mirage... He laughed and cut the laughter short because that was Townline cabin and through the open door he could see movement that was no trick of his vagrant senses.

A man in there was flinging things to the floor, dropping to his knees beside them, making wild, extravagant motions as he crammed articles into a pack sack. Young closed one eye tightly to concentrate on recognition. The man was unmistakably Tod West.

Kerry staggered on a few steps, trying to get the rifle to his shoulder with one arm. He could not do it. The thing was a tremendous

and unwieldy weight. He needed a rest for the barrel... Yonder was a rock and he lurched toward it. An upstanding slab of limestone, it was, split by frost with a crack into which he could have laid his arm.

But he did not try to lay his arm there. He laid the rifle barrel in the opening and stretched himself laboriously on his belly.

Carefully he sighted on the doorway and worked his tongue in his parched mouth, striving to conjure moisture there so his speech might be good.

"Put up your hands!" he croaked. "I've got you covered and—"

West reared on his knees, rigid. Young's finger was on the trigger, ready to thwart any move... And then his man was out of sight, throwing himself sideways along the floor.

Kerry fired and the shock of recoil sent fresh agonies through his body. He saw a leg of the table, on the far side of the room and opposite the doorway, splinter... Then silence.

When he rallied the strength, he called:

"Come out, West! I'll give you one chance!"

No response.

"Come out!" he tried to shout, but his voice broke...

On that West spoke:

"To hell with you, Young!"

Kerry drew a great breath which tore at his wound. So that was it. West had confidence. Desperate, he would be defiant. The only means of exit were on this side: the door and the one window. So long as he could remain in this position and keep his eyes and mind clear, West could not emerge...

But how long would that be? Tod West spoke again.

"I'll wait you out, Young!" he taunted. "When you've bled enough, I'll finish the job!"

He shut his teeth and tried to pray because he could feel a renewed trickle of blood down his side.

"Oh, God," he began, mumbling. "Give me strength to scotch this snake! Oh, God, let me hold out to save for Nan what's hers!... Please, God!"

Tip, beside him, moaned and trembled and began licking at his leg again.

Thereafter was no speech, no movement for a long interval. The shadows shifted beneath the march of the sun. A fly droned about his head. His tongue was so parched that it seemed it would crack.

Then suddenly he was aware of faint stirrings within the cabin and something flashed across the doorway. West had crossed to the window end of the cabin and Kerry fired again, aimlessly.

"Still awake, eh?" West jeered. "Look your last... Or, I'll trade with you. Throw your rifle into the clearing and I'll give you my word I'll not come near—"

Kerry fired again and a window pane pulverized. He heard the other cursing sharply and knew he had not been wrong: the suggestion of a shadow against the glass had been West, cautiously peering out...

It was agony to pump in another cartridge. His left arm lay cold and lifeless beside him but his shoulder burned and throbbed. He got a box of shells out of his pocket somehow and stuffed the magazine full. Blackness hovered over him for a moment.

He tried to reason things out. He could not last much longer. Loading his gun had started the blood again. When the bleeding sapped him low enough, or when night fell, West could slip out and be gone forever...

What was it Nan had said about West and the country beyond?...

Oh, yes? West knew it like a book. He was the only one who knew it. Once in it, then, the Downer account against him, both in blood and money, might well be written off.

If he only had help. If Nan or Ezra or any of them only knew where he was. But they did not. All they knew was that he was hunting a bee tree. He was alone... he and Tip were alone...

He held his eyes on the cabin and kept the rifle butt to his good shoulder with his chin. His right hand went out to Tip, caressing the short, curly hair, and the dog whined; not from pain; it was an inquiring, concerned whine and he stared hard into his master's face.

"Tip! You've got it... to do!" Kerry whispered. "Tough, with that leg, but it's her only chance. Maybe... my only chance... You've got it to do for Nan! Understand? For Nan!"

The dog's nose began to quirk and his tail moved slightly.

"Hear me, Tip? (God, I can't tell whether I'm yelling or whispering!) Hear me?"—gripping the coat and shaking the dog a little. "Go to Nan, Tip! Go to Nan!... Hie on! To Nan... Nan!"

He shoved at the wounded animal and Tip rose painfully to his feet, staring incredulously at his master.

"Nan?" he seemed to be asking. "Go away, with you in a jam like this? Not on your life, chum!"

Again Young spoke: "Hie on! Nan, I said!" The savagery in his voice made the dog's ears drop meekly.

He had raised himself to his elbow, thrusting his face close to the dog, snarling the words.

Surprised and shocked Tip slunk away. He licked his chops and wagged his tail apologetically. Never before in his life had he been addressed so. At a little distance he halted as though expecting to have Kerry relent.

"Nan, I said! Go to Nan!" His eyes were glowing with fever, now. "Hie! Go on! Go find Nan, I tell you!"

He picked up a pebble and clumsily shied it at Tip, groaning from the pain it gave.

With a protesting little whimper, that one leg dragging uselessly, the ragged bone ends biting into raw flesh at every move, the dog made his way slowly through the brush. Shortly he came out to the road he had traveled before. He stood there and gave a long look backward. Then he limped gingerly across the first rut and, panting from the effort, set out to do his master's bidding...

CHAPTER XVI

AND now a man fights to retain consciousness. He fights to keep his eyes open, to stifle the buzzing in his head, to down the nausea which grips his vitals.

He shouts a warning; he shoots again; he hears a harsh laugh...

Something strange about the window, now; something moves there. Or are his eyes up to tricks again? No, something coming across the sill, poking out, long and dull...

A rifle barrel, thrusting toward him, and the sill beneath it splinters as he squeezes the trigger of his own weapon.

The other gun is hastily drawn; West curses breathlessly.

"You can't last, Young!" West calls. "Will you trade?"

"To hell with you!" he cries, trying to put strong scorn into the words, but Tod West laughs.

"Your voice is a whimper!" he says. "I give you another half hour... Put your gun in the clearing and you'll have your chance, same as me!"

"No, never!" Kerry cries, and knows his words are a weak falsetto...

He sat at the telephone in Nan's office.

"Sergeant Parfit, Commissioner," he said over the long distance wire.

"Yes, sir; we've got everything cut

off, except to the northwest. We're organizing a posse now to work that way... No... I'm sorry, sir. Yes, sir; if he's gotten into that country it'll be tough going for us... I'm sorry, sir," flushing. "How he got the tip-off, we don't know. Yes, sir. I've got the best trailers in the country. What? ... We're nearly ready to start. Yes, sir... Of course..."

He hung up, the flush caused by rebuke still staining his cheeks.

"Now, coroner," he began as he rose, and stopped.

He bent to stare through the window.

"What's the matter with that dog?" he muttered.

He had come a long ways; he had come slowly. His one leg dragged behind him, now. His eyes were glazed and his lips caked with mud where he had licked wet earth from the ruts.

Ezra shoved up his spectacles.

"I declare!" he said. "I declare, officer, that's Young's dog!"

The sergeant of police was outside with long strides.

Others were running toward Tip, collapsed in the road, now. Jim



Her Lips Were Living Warmth on His Cheek.

Hinkle was there, chattering in excitement.

"What's matter, Tip? What's matter?"

"Mad!" someone warned. "Stay back! Look out!"

Jim and the others did draw back. It would not do to get too close to those clicking teeth, those blazing eyes.

"Why, he's hurt! Let's see."—Ezra Adams trying, now, but the dog drove him back, too.

Advice, warnings, speculation; confusion. And then Nan Downer pushed through the circle.

"What's wrong? ... Oh! Tip! Why, Tip... The tail flopped heavily, the dirt smeared tongue lolled; the dog panted and whined.

The girl dropped to her knees beside him and he put his nose in her lap... The eyes closed and Tip drew a quivering sigh. He had come to Nan at last.

Now he could be touched; now the hurt could be examined.

"Broken!" gasped Ezra. "And... Good Lord, sergeant, this dog's been shot!"

"He was with Kerry!" Nan cried. "He was with Kerry... Ezra! Where is Kerry? Where is..."

"That," snapped the policeman, "is what we've got to find out! Come on, you trailers! Look! You can see every step he took in this road!"

Mid-afternoon, now, and his head rolled drunkenly as Young fought off that cloud of darkness. He could not hold it much longer. The cabin was beyond his range of vision...

He had one cartridge left. He remembered that. For weeks, it seemed, his intermittent firing had kept West within that cabin. He

had only one more shot to fire, and he could not see the bead of his sight. That was all blurred, and other matters; pain and sickness and his manner of getting here...

His face drooped heavily against the stock. He was so weary... wanted to sleep... just a moment... just a second... One little wink of respite...

And then he knew that for ever so long voices had been in his ear. Voices, saying over and over...

"Here he went!"... Or was it just once that the words had been said? Just once? "Here he went!"

must have been Jim Hinkle saying that. Jim's voice, saying it just now, just once!... "Here he went!"

And Jim was standing there on the road, bent over, with a groan around him... And Nan with his hand on Jim's shoulder, and the sound of glass breaking...

Glass breaking! Window glass breaking before the thrust of a rifle barrel through the pane; tinkling as it spilled over the sill...

A man with his shoulder slumped tight against the window, sighting that rifle, and...

Tod West, that, taking his toll. One, two, three... They drop there in the road before the crash of his repeating weapon. One, two, three... West in sight, exposed to Young!

Oh, how well Kerry could now.

He could see the bead of his rifle sight, could see it flash true against that bulky breast and the recoil did not hurt, that time. He did not even think of it...

He saw that other rifle barrel fly upward. Saw Tod West spin about, back to the window... Saw him stare there a moment and then, in that terrible silence, saw him disappear with the crash which loosed torrents of cries and words and sounds of running feet...

Then Kerry Young put his cheek down on the cool, moist earth and drew a long breath...

They had him back at Nan's an hour. Ezra had the bullet out before sundown. It was midnight when he opened his eyes.

At first, he thought he was alone in the room and then realized that he could not be alone; a man also cannot have that sweet sense of peace and permanence and well-being which spread over him like a mantle...

He moved his head slightly and saw her sitting there, straight as a stiff and expectant, her face paler than ever beneath the shadow of light.

"Nan," he breathed and she came quickly close.

"Oh, Kerry!" The words were sob.

"And you're... all right?"

"Right! Everything's right!" He closed his eyes.

"Tip?"

"Ezra says he's done the best job of bone setting he's ever done for man or beast."

Pause.

"Holt?"

"Here,"—in a whisper. "Waiting to thank you... before he goes. He cleared his throat feebly."

"And... West?"

"Already gone,"—gravely. "Forever."

He stared hard at the ceiling through a long moment.

"Nan... I guess... I guess I'm all right, but a hand never can... just tell. There's something I've... got to say... right off for the... right time... place... Excuse... groggy..."

"But I've got to... say it now..."

"Sh!" Gently she placed her fingers against his lips. "You mustn't talk. You'll be all right. Ezra swears it. But now... And I'll say it for you, dear, dear Kerry... I love you... Is that it? ... I love you... And I love you, Kerry... Love you, love you, love you..."

Her lips were living warmth on his cheek.

[THE END]