

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.

CHAPTER III—Continued

Frantically, then, the retriever nosed the packs, shoving his muzzle deep into them, and came up with the track line in his teeth. Over he went into the shallow water and backing, scrooching down, wagging his tail, growling, he dragged the canoe afloat. Then, in deeper water, he swam rapidly up and across the current, head held sideways by the tug of the line in his jaws.

"That's a smart dog," the girl said. "Smart," echoed Young, and looked down at her. Her face was averted and a flush stained her cheeks.

"Whatever a girl says to a stranger who has helped her out of a situation that's at once uncomfortable and, perhaps, dangerous . . . whatever is to be said, I should say to you." She was fighting desperately for self-control. "I . . . I'm very grateful. Is there more to be said?"

"That wasn't necessary," he replied. "Not even that. . . It was quite a privilege to throw Tod West into the river."

He reached out to take the line from Tip. "Good dog," he muttered. "Go ashore and shake."

The girl had turned toward him. "You know Tod West?"

"A long time ago I thought I did. And for a good many years I've wondered how well anyone in that country knew him. But just on suspicion, it was good to upset him. I believe," he added, "that he ruined the best friend I shall ever have."

"So I'm not the first! After all that he's seemed to be with us, he has a past, has he? . . . And a future too, perhaps,"—bitterly.

"I took it, from his parting shot, that he had some devilry afoot."

"Devilry!"—in an angered whisper.

"Was it just because I happened along and took a hand that he's going to make you a pauper?"

She shook her head. "No. That was settled before you came. It was after I wouldn't . . . wouldn't barter myself to save my property that he seemed to lose his head; that he became quite something else from what we've always thought him to be."

The boat grated on sand and Kerry sat down looking hard at her.

"I have a particular and peculiar interest in this bird. A man doesn't change, you know; if he's a rascal today, he was yesterday; if he is today, he will be tomorrow."

"Do you mind telling a stranger what this West's game is? I don't want to pry, but—"

"You're not prying. It is little enough for me to tell you. I'm in your debt, you know. . . Yours and Tod West's!"

She stretched one pac-clad foot so the warm sun could dry it better and appeared to ponder on where to begin.

"It's better to give you the whole

picture, I suppose. I'm Nan Downer. I came into this country four years ago with my father. Maybe you've heard of him? Cash Downer? No?" She sighed.

"Well, we bought on contract West's mill below here and the big tract of mixed timber to the north of the river. My father had a new idea in the utilization of forest resources. He had felt for a long time that the things we'd considered by-product of such properties were, perhaps, almost as big money makers as the timber itself, handled rightly. I mean, recreational facilities.

"This is probably the best big tract of the northern hardwoods that is left. There's fish and game in abundance. My father laid a very careful plan to interest a group of wealthy men in buying locations up here for their hunting and fishing clubs. They were to own their various parcels but were to give up the privilege of selectively logging on their descriptions over a long period.

"But to show these prospects what would be left after we'd done this selective cutting necessitated considerable of an operation with higher costs, in the beginning, and a reduced income. In other words our project was a slow starter and we didn't have sufficient capital to be very safe.

"We kept the mill running, though, did our cutting in several types of stands and last year were just getting ready to show some prospects what we had to offer.

"My father had sunk all the cash he had in the down payment. It was hard work getting the annual payments together but he had managed it. Last November another payment was due and we were going to be able to meet it. Then, one November night, my father was killed and the money he was bringing out to pay to Tod West was stolen."

"Murdered, you mean?" "Murdered," she said lowly and paused. "That, of course, put the undertaking in a bad way. Just now it's very difficult to refinance a timber operation of any sort; also it's hard to find men with money to spend on their expensive toys, which is what these camps will amount to, if and when the plan develops. Tod West seemed very sympathetic, though, and told me to take my time and that he wouldn't see me lose.

"But this summer he commenced to hint and then to ask and then to crowd. He has other timber. He has had to stop a big pulp operation below because of the market. He needs money. I am doing my best to interest prospects and get the cash together to pay him but so far I haven't had much luck. . . ."

"And then today he followed me up here and said . . . said that if I would marry him he would forget that—"

She bit her lip and stopped.

Young drew a hand slowly along one thigh. It was a gesture almost of satisfaction and he nodded slowly.

"That checks with the guess I've had . . . as to the sort of bird he really is.

"When you wouldn't agree to that?"

The girl gave a shuddering shrug. "You saw a part of it. He seemed to go insane and then I realized that all along, for months, perhaps for years, he's been . . . well, thinking things about me.

"Where were you, anyhow, that you saw?"

"Up above. At the head of the rapid. I was just going to—"

"But you didn't carry? Why?"—startled—"you mean you ran Dead Bear?"

"If that's what you call the rapid I did." He laughed at the astonishment in her eyes.

"You ran that water to help me, a stranger?"

His laughter rose higher. "I'd have swum it to help anybody if I'd known Tod West was the party making trouble?"

"Then you must have known him far better than most people here do."

"Quite a figure, is he?" She considered. "A . . . a king, in this country! He owns most of it. Most of the people in it are dependent on him, in one way or another. He isn't a man to take lightly."

"Then I sure am glad it was the Mad Woman I picked out this summer!"

The girl eyed him curiously.

"You're just going through, then? Your objective wasn't near here?"

"I had no objective when I put in. Now, I have. . . . I've a question I want answered. When I've done that, then perhaps I can go on."

"If you're going to stay on here," she said, "we'd be glad to put you up. We have accommodations for fishermen, you know. It's part of our job. That's why I'm here, now. Two of our prospects are fishing

the beaver pond up the creek,"—nodding toward a small tributary which debouched above them. "That is why I happened to be here."

"Nice of you. But I've my tent. Shingles and windows bother me."

"The latch string will be out, though. I . . . Please believe that I'm truly thankful for all you've done."



"You Ran That Water to Help Me, a Stranger?"

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CHAPTER IV

HE WENT on, then, pondering the vagaries of chance which had guided today's encounter, after all these years, under such particular circumstances.

So West was respected, was he? A king, the girl had said. But the sort who will press low advantage.

An hour later he made out buildings below. First was a log structure, low-eaved and wide-roofed with a screened porch and automobiles parked in its clearing. Not a club, not a logging camp. It must be Nan's establishment, he decided.

On below he discerned the screened stack of a mill and the song of the saw came harshly to his ears. A railroad trestle spanned the river, joining the small group of buildings around the mill to another, larger settlement, with many humble habitations, one pretentious house of peeled logs, a boxcar depot and several stores.

He went still further down, landed in a clump of poplars and set about making camp. He worked

adeptly and within an amazingly short time had his tent up, bed made, and firewood chopped.

He shared his supper with Tip, washed his few dishes in the stream, and lighting a straight-stemmed pipe, for a time watched the afterglow fade.

"You watch camp, Tip," he said as he rose abruptly. "We'll go see . . . what we can see!"

He launched his canoe, paddled across and up the murmuring river and landed under the bank where yellow lights showed through the gathering darkness.

The white front of the town's largest store loomed above and he stood outside a brief interval, looking about. This was the heart of Tod West's dominion, West's Landing by name. It was here that the man had established himself as a king.

The store was well filled. An Indian was buying grub and stuffing his purchases into a pack-sack; a bearded man was trying on shoes. In the rear, a card game was in progress.

Kerry's eyes fastened on the back of the one card player whose face, at least in part, was not revealed to him. The man was Tod West.

Several loungers watched the game and as Young leaned idly against the counter two of them left and came toward him.

"Jim shouldn't be in there," one muttered.

"Hell, no!" his companion agreed. "You can bet your life if I had a kid in the shape his is, I wouldn't be stackin' up what little I had against a lucky dog like Tod."

Their talk was broken, then, as both greeted another entrant.

The taller man resumed: "Doc's out now, ain't he?"

The other nodded. "Over at Jim's. They sent for Jim but he put 'em off."

Young lounged toward the rear and took up a position against the wall, behind and to one side of West's chair.

Five were in the game West was dealing and talked as he distributed the cards.

"An ace to you, a nine to you, a deuce for Jimmy, a jack for Sawyer and a nine to the dealer . . . which lets him out!"

His voice was good-humored, tolerant, the sort of voice that wins the confidence of men. Always, that had been characteristic. . . . He folded his hand, now, and awaited the betting. One of the players, chanced a dollar, his companion called, Jim raised five and the man, Sawyer, dropped out. The five was called by both the others but Jim won and gathered in the pot with significant eagerness.

"Good lad, Jimmy!" West rumbled. "You've been losin' lately; always like to see losers catch up!"

The deal went clear around. Young noticed that West played shrewdly, with a hard calculation beneath his easy talk.

The deal had come back to West. The hole cards were going out.

"All heavy!" he chuckled. "All heavy cards in the hole, boys! Everybody's going to have luck this hand. . . . Luck of one kind or another!"

And he dealt himself from the bottom!

A sharp, chilling thrill ran Young's body. He looked at the other watchers, at the players, studying the face of each. None had detected that move.

"And here we come," West went on. "Here we come, lads! Coming out with a seven and next a ten-spot and a queen for Sawyer. . . ." The cards flipped from his hand toward their appointed places, turning in the air to fall face upward and Kerry, watching closely, saw that he was "second" dealing. The top card of the deck never left its place.

Again Young studied those faces about the table. Sycophants, most of them; they wore fixed grins as Tod West kept up his talk. Their interest was on what he said, not on what he did.

"What, Sawyer? A whole buck on the queen? Let's see, now . . ."

Hum,"—peeking at his hole card. "Well, I've got just enough here to string along."

Hum,"—peeking at his hole card. "Well, I've got just enough here to string along."

He came in for his dollar and again called the cards he turned and once more that top card kept sliding back and forth over its changing neighbors.

Three cards in each hand were face up, then. Again Sawyer bet his queen, tossing in a five-dollar bill from the little pile of money before him.

"Now, I'll help build a pot for you, Sawyer," said West. "Leave it to old Tod! There's a five-spot. But don't put too much faith in women."

He chuckled, but there was no mirth in the sound, Kerry thought. He judged that Sawyer had another queen in the hole; he was the aggressor and a bit too aggressive for a man with only the high card showing. No pair was in sight; the queen dominated the board. Before Tod West were exposed an innocuous four and five and nine-spot of three suits.

Jim Hinkle and another had dropped out.

"So we spin 'em for the final heat," drawled West. "We drop a jack to you, neighbor, and Sawyer catches himself a six and I . . . Take a look! I draw myself a large ball of fire!"

The top card had finally dropped. It was the ace of diamonds and Kerry straightened slowly. West's hole card had been dealt from the bottom; for certain, it was another ace!

"Now, with this large ace showin', it puts the bet to me, I take it. . . . Hum. . . . Sawyer, you got a queen showin' 'nd you been proud of her. I wonder what else, if any, you've got. . . . But this old ace of mine. . . . Now, it'd be a downright insult to bet less 'n ten dollars."

The tourist folded and Sawyer eyed Tod's hand.

"But me, I got only eight bucks left, Tod," he said.

"All right! For the eight, then. Call!"

Sawyer shoved in his money and turned his hole card. "Pair!" he said, showing the second queen, and leaned forward.

"I warned you," chuckled West. "I told you to stay out. All along, I had him." He turned the ace of clubs.

The man rubbed his chin.

"Well," he said, "guess I better, that cleans me out."

"So you're leavin' us flat, Sawyer!" put in West. "Four handed's not so good. Anybody else want to try his luck just to keep the game goin'?"

"It's too rich for my blood!" a youth giggled.

"Anybody else? Last call!"

He looked up and around, grinning, and the grin changed, ran into a stiff sort of grimace as Kerry Young moved out from his position against the wall.

"If the game's open," he said, "I don't mind trying my luck now and again."

Eyes were on him, not on Tod; so the group missed one half the exchange of glances which followed. Emotion chased emotion across the older man's eyes; surprise, hatred, chagrin and a malevolent sort of inspiration.

"Why, sure," Tod said but could not keep the grudging quality from his tone.

Young moved, then, to the chair just vacated by Sawyer.

A change had come over the place. The onlookers had ceased their idle talk; the two fishermen from Nan Downer's eyed Young appraisingly and Tod West, shoving the deck to the dealer, lighted a cigar with a hand which was not just steady.

Kerry played cautiously. His luck was not good. Through the first half dozen deals he stayed only once after the second card. Am Hinkle, at his left, lost repeatedly and, with his losing, his tension increased.

(TO BE CONTINUED)