

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.

CHAPTER IV—Continued

—5—

He hitched at his belt with a frankly swaggering gesture.

"After all these years, the job was done quickly; in mere hours. And now I . . . can be on my way."

He turned on his heel and made slowly for the door.

A buzzing murmur filled the room. Eyes were on Kerry, on Tod West, standing there with much seething in him. He had a role to play, this West. He had a reputation at stake, loyalties to consider . . . perhaps things to fear. His place in the country was in the balance, he knew. But the charge of cheating at cards was too incredible in the minds of these other men to be of more than passing consequence if he played his role properly, as a respected leader should.

He found his voice at last.

"Hold up there, you!" Kerry was at the threshold.

He turned, smiling that bitter smile.

"You're a rat!" West said again heavily. "You're a . . . damned rat! What's the idea, tryin' to make me out a crook? Black-mail?"

"I never seen or heard of you! And I've only this to say, after callin' you a rat. Just this: you'd best be on your way come sun-up! Your kind's not wanted here!"

Kerry lifted a hand to scratch a temple slowly.

"That's tough on me, Tod West," he said. "I'm through, here. I stumbled on the thing I wanted to know for years. And I'd like to be gone, being the roaming kind. But if there's one thing I'm more afraid of than taking root, it's . . . being driven, Tod West!" He began to laugh. "So I've got to stay! I've got to light a while!"

He went out into the darkness and his deep laughter floated back to them. A fierce exultation racked him and he did not look about; did not see Nan Downer standing there in the edge of the light shaft from a window, one hand across her breast.

CHAPTER V

AT ABOUT the time Kerry Young was finishing his evening meal, Dan Downer and Ezra Adams, short, squat, gray-haired logging-country doctor who had driven out from Shoestring, the county seat, walked slowly across the trestle from Nan's headquarters to West's Land-

The old man listened attentively and unconsciously slowed his pace as the girl's story progressed toward its climax. Her voice, though low, was quick and tense, and once it caught in a sob.

"And that's that, Ezra!" she said tremulously. "It's me or . . . or the property. 'Oh,'—with sudden bitterness—"I've had a feeling all along that it wasn't the man the country thinks him to be!"

"That's your womanly intuition. And my opinion was a . . . doctor's, I guess."

They talked for a time, standing in the dusk and then the girl said:

"Now, for Jim and Elsie Hinkle's troubles!" and led him resolutely on.

They entered a tar paper house where a woman washed dishes by the light of a kerosene lamp, her mouth set in an expression of forbearance. In a chair, his one leg strapped between wooden splints, a five-year-old boy played with a battered toy. At sight of the physician he began to yelp excitedly and threw the toy violently away.

"Unc' Ezra! Unc' Ezra!" he cried, his face shining.

"Hullo, Jimmy! Evening, Elsie. All ready to be measured up for the brace, eh? Well, well, we've come along so far and have got kind of a leg left. Now we'll start on the job of making a silk purse out of . . . something."

He began pulling off his coat.

"Where's Jim?" he asked.

The woman's face darkened. "At the store, I guess. Gambling again, I suppose."

"Well, we'll go ahead, anyhow."

And he went ahead, holding the misshapen leg on his knees, eyeing the long, blue creases of some terrible hurt and Nan looked on, watching the play of his deft fingers.

The painstaking chore, finally finished, and no Jim in sight, the two walked toward the store, Ezra saying:

"Of course, if Jim hasn't the cash, I'll have to buy the brace myself. I told him that last time I was out and he promised. But,"—with a sigh—"times being what they are, I'm scraping the bottom of the till myself!"

So they approached the store and saw what they saw.

As they left, Tod West was saying to Jim:

"Hell, No! I won't take back that money! He's a rat and a liar, Jim, but . . ." He shrugged and met Jim's eyes squarely, neatly covering the effort required. "Lord, boy, I've always tried to lean backward in my dealin's with others! No, sir. If any man says I took money unfairly, I don't even want to argue. Not on your life, I don't. Money ain't worth that, Jim!"

Kerry sat in the darkness on the river bank, listening to the booping of an owl and the song of crickets and the plopping of a night feeding trout. He smoked leisurely and Tip, his head in his lap, breathed evenly. . . .

So his childish suspicion had been right; so the last sane thought—also a suspicion—which Jack Snow had had, had been justified.

The dog now lifted his head sharply and Kerry could feel him stiffen. After a moment, a low vibration ran his back, which was the beginnings of a growl.

"Steady!" the man whispered and reached for his bed, jerked his rifle from the blanket folds.

Then, aloud, he hailed:

"Who's there?"

A voice from above answered:

"Caller, Young! Still up?" Slow footsteps came through the poplars.

Young, on his feet, waited with the dog stiff and suspicious beside him.

"Funny business, bustin' in on a man this way, this hour," the voice went on, nearer now. "But I got things to talk over." He could see the other, now. He was short, squat, and breathed rapidly. "I'm named Adams, Young; Ezra Adams. I'm the local pill peddler."

"Oh, hullo, doctor!" The old man's voice was pleasant. "Glad you dropped in. Here, sit on the bed. Light your pipe?"

"No, guess not, thanks. I . . . This is kind of confidential."

"So?"

He felt the doctor's attempt to scrutinize his own shadowed face. "Sit down. Nobody can get within ear shot with Tip here."

Adams began in a moment. "I was in the store when Tod made his play, Young. I saw and heard and . . . things have happened since that make me feel maybe I'm going to have to ask your help, strangers though we are. Also, I heard about what happened this afternoon. I added that to what I know about you."

Pause. "If you could be interested in a job here, you'd be free to take it?"

"Job? What kind of job?"

The old man eyed him in the darkness. "Coroner's clerk," he said in a whisper.

"You kidding me?"

"Not in the least. I'm . . . I'm more serious and in greater need than I've been since I can recollect."

"Well, that's a new one on me!" He laughed. "Coroner's clerk! Why—"

"Let me explain this a little. I have to pop it right at you without any preliminaries because it's . . . it's an emergency, I guess. Nan didn't go into detail about the killing of her father. I want you to know that. You've got to know it. That is, if you're going to consider my proposal."

"You see, Downer was a queer old duffer. Salt of the earth, but queer; eccentric. It was one of his eccentricities that led to his murder. He never would deal with a man except for cash. Kept a bank account and all, but when he did business checks didn't go."

"He had this payment due to West last November. The fifteenth, it was. The day before he drove into town and drew the money from the bank, started home about dusk and was killed not three miles from here by a bullet in the brain. The money, in one of these tin boxes, was taken out of his car. It amounted to over twelve thousand dollars."

"You see, I'm coroner here. I started an investigation and the sheriff, he fussed some."

"Two men, only, that we knew of, had the slightest motive. One was Jim Hinkle, whose money you got back for him tonight. He'd been working for Cash, had been fired the day before and fired with gusto, which was Downer's way. But he was playing cribbage with Tod West all that evening and stayed in West's house all night, his family being away. So with West being what he's thought to be,"—drily—"Hinkle was counted out."

"West was quite active in this thing. He wanted his money and Nan, Downer's only heir, didn't have more to pay him. He dug up the information that Holt Stuart had had a run-in with Cash early in the week. Holt was working for Cash. Well, it seems that Holt's pretty well struck with Nan. He's a good boy, but Cash was a cantankerous old cuss and he rode the boy pretty hard because of where he'd let his interests stray. As a sort of punishment, he'd sent Holt out to a cabin on Townline lake to do some mapping and made him stay there all alone."

"The sheriff, after West got through with him, was convinced Holt was his man and started right in to work up a case against him. But I stopped that. A coroner, you know, 's got it all over a sheriff for authority. I drove out and found the boy with an ankle so badly sprained that he couldn't possibly've been out."

"Well, we impeached a coroner's jury and I got the bullet out of Cash but we had so little to go on that the verdict had to be an open one. Then we started trying to trace the money. It was mostly in new Federal Reserve notes and the bank had the serial numbers. That's where it sits now."

"Downer's dead and the money's gone," said Kerry. "Lord, if Miss Downer could get hold of that stolen money it'd save her life, wouldn't it?"

"It would"—again drily. "That's what I'm here for. To see if you'll help me locate it."

"Locate it? What d'you mean?"

"This!" The old man leaned forward and tapped Young's knee.



"I've Come to Tell You," He Said, "That This Ain't a Very Healthy Place to Hang Around!"

"The money," he whispered, "is still in the country!"

"The devil!"

"S' truth! In my pocket I have a twenty dollar bill that was part of it. It was paid me on account tonight."

"You got any idea where it came from?"

Ezra looked around and listened. "Out of your poker game," he said grimly.

After a moment Kerry gave a low whistle.

"Say! That makes the situation look up, doesn't it?"

"That's why I came to you, a stranger. I need help and need it right now. That money is cached somewhere in the country. Whoever is hiding it, needs money badly. Young, will you take a commission as my deputy?"

Kerry's heart was beating rapidly. Here, indeed, was a chance to do something for Nan Downer. He waited a moment, considering all things. Then he said:

"I'll go you, doctor!"

"Good! But we'll have to keep it between you and me. Not even Nan must know."

Across the river in the big house of peeled logs which was Tod West's abode that citizen stood before Jim Hinkle, who was seated and whose eyes remained averted.

"And now it's up to you," West said heavily. "I guess it's my right to expect that much from you."

"It'll look like hell, for me to do that," Jim protested. "After what he thought he done for me. . . . How'll I go at it? Besides, he's nobody to fool with. I only—"

"Shut up!" West gestured savagely. "Because a rat comes along and frames me so I'll look like a crook, you'll forget all I've done for you!"

"Well,"—with a show of sullen defiance—"what if I do think it wasn't a frame-up against you? What then?"

West leaned forward, face darkening, mouth setting in a cruel line.

"So that's it, eh? So that's how you feel! Well, when you've forgotten everything else about me, remember this: I lied for you once, didn't I? I told 'em all I played cribbage with you the night Downer was killed, didn't I? And nobody knows I found you wandering around so blind drunk you couldn't tell where you'd been? And with a rifle, too? What, I ask you"—bending forward and rubbing his palms on his hips slowly—"what'd happen if I came clean with the sheriff and told him that, eh?"

Hinkle raised an unsteady hand to his chin.

"You wouldn't do that, Tod?"

"Try me and see!"

Their gazes locked and after a time Jim's fell.

"All right," he said. "I'll get some of the boys. Tomorrow, we'll see what we can do about gettin' him down river."

CHAPTER VI

THE sun had climbed from the bank of orange clouds which screened its rising; the mill whistle had blown summoning men to work and the saw had at last taken up its daily song.

Kerry Young had been up before the break of day, built his fire, bathed in the stinging waters of the river and dressed leisurely. Then he set his shaving kit on a stump beside the stream and proceeded to clean cheeks and chin of yesterday's beard stubble. Today he was going to present himself to Nan Downer and ask for work, a move which Ezra Adams had urged.

It was while peering into the mirror as he began manipulating the razor that his eyes lost their glint of laughter and became most intent. Across the way spruces grew thick along the river bank, and as he turned his back to the stream, he caught in the mirror a reflection of branches being parted, of a face peering at him.

He pretended to give this watcher no heed, but he took long at his shaving, and half a dozen times had a fair glimpse of the man's face. It was no one he had seen before.

He was not all surprised when Tip, recumbent beside the fire, raised his head sharply and gave a low growl.

"Easy, chum!" Kerry muttered.

"Coming into the open, eh?"

But it was nothing across the stream which had attracted the dog; nor was the man approaching the one who had spied on him from the timber.

Jim Hinkle was coming along the trail which followed the bank.

"Well, Jim?" Young asked.

Hinkle plunged at once into his errand.

"I've come to tell you," he said, "that this ain't a very healthy place for you to hang around!"

"So? Kind of you to take this trouble. Is this . . . a friendly act or a warning, Jim?"

"Call it what you want to. I come here because it looked last night as if you was doin' me a favor. Instead, you put me in a hell of a hole. You, nor nobody else, can make me think that Tod West would cheat at cards!"

A whiff of surprise escaped Kerry.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he breathed. "You really aren't convinced?"

"I don't know what your game was, but when a stranger in this country makes a play like that with a man like Tod—well, he don't get far."

"Maybe. Not at first."

"Or anywhere along the line!" The man appeared to be making an effort to lash himself into a mood of truculence. "If you'd stuck around to hear what they said in the store last night, you'd find out how far you got."

(TO BE CONTINUED)