

FLAME IN THE FOREST

by HAROLD TITUS

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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.

CHAPTER VI—Continued

"If you know what's good for you," in his manner, then was a convincing quality not present before, "you'll haul out today!"

"And if I shouldn't . . . what then?"

Hinkle shrugged. "Well, I'd figure I'd done all that anybody can do for you by comin' here." He advanced a few steps, his voice moderating. "I'm not handin' you anything, Young, I'm just doin' you a friendly act. This country thinks a lot of Tod, and there's men here that won't stand to see anything done against him."

"Yeah? West, and who else?"

"Plenty!"

Young let his head drop backward and laughed.

So that was that!

He had been spied upon since daybreak, had been warned to clear out by an emissary who did not say all that he thought and felt.

Not long after Jim Hinkle's departure Kerry set out, Tip following at his heels.

Nan Downer looked up from her desk and listened to Kerry's brief speech explaining his presence.

"A job?" she asked, and surprise in her face.

It was not the surprise which made the deepest impression on Young. It was the quick coloring of her cheeks, the changing light in her eyes which indicated an interest in him over and above any amazement or regret or enthusiasm which his question might have provoked.

"Yes, a job. You know how it is, I guess; I've sort of got to stick around a while; and when I'm in one place, I don't just hanker to loaf."

She traced a pencil-line on a pad before her, considering.

"If you want to take a chance of defying Tod West, it is your affair. What sort of job are you after?"

Kerry grinned.

"I can do a lot of things in and around the woods, all the way from

cruising, up through logging operations to milling."

"Are you a draftsman as well?"

She turned to a series of large maps hanging from the wall, greens and reds and blues splashing the surfaces to indicate the various types of growth which cloaked the descriptions, with figures showing the size and densities of stands, with streams and lakes set down in detail.

"You see," she explained, "these prospects of ours are the sort who will want to know, down to the last detail, what we're offering in exchange for their money. Could you do just this sort of thing as well as these jobs have been done?"

Young stepped closer to the maps, studying them a lengthy interval.

"I can," he said finally.

Nan hesitated.

"Of course, we can't pay you what you might get some other place. We're up against it, as you already know."

She was obviously embarrassed, but Kerry said quickly: "Don't worry about that. I'd figure, Miss Downer, that it'd be a rare privilege working for you. When do we start?"

"I can't talk that detail with you now, because Holt is out on the job. We've worked such things out together since my father died. He'll be back this evening. Will you come up then?"

He would, he said, and started out of the office. Tip stood outside the screen door and now whined.

"Oh, here's the dog!" Nan cried, going quickly ahead of Young, opening the door and kneeling on the step. The retriever inspected her with eyes and nose, and at first bore himself with perfect indifference, being, as he was, a one-man beast. But when her small hand came to rest on the broad crown of his head, and her gentle voice told him what a handsome fellow he was . . . why, then the tall commenced to waggle a bit, and his eyes rolled, and his pink tongue lolled a little, and he panted with that satisfaction which comes to any male with sufficient flattery!

"He likes me!" the girl laughed happily.

"Why shouldn't he?" Young asked with all sobriety. "That dog's got sense!" Then he laughed at her discomfiture.

He started back toward his camp, and had gone half-way from Nan's headquarters to the mill when he saw a man running along the railroad track toward the trestle. Then another. And from West's Landing, three more were crossing rapidly. . . . Then a scream reached his ears.

"Something stirring!" he muttered, and began to trot.

"What's up?" Young called to a man.

"Somebody fell in!"

A woman's scream cut the air sharply, and Young saw a man grasp her arms, holding her from hurling herself into the swirling current below.

"Kid, I'll bet, Tip!" he muttered.

Sure enough, a child. "Little girl!" a boy answered excitedly when he asked the question again. "Dunno who!"

Kerry paused at the water's edge and jerked at his pac laces.

"Tip!" The dog, tall vibrating as this excitement infected him, peered eagerly into his face. "Somebody in there; in the river. On the bottom. . . . Fetch!"

In went the retriever, swimming rapidly straight out from shore. Tip circled slowly in the current, head tilted, trying to see below the surface. Then suddenly he dived. He did not go deep; his tail protruded, and he was under but a second.

"Fetch, Tip!" Young cried sharply when he came up. Seconds mean life. . . .

A half-dozen men were in the river, diving from logs or from the trestle, all searching blindly.

And then, below and outside these frantic searchers, Tip came up with a sharp little yip!

At that Young went in, swimming stanchly.

The dog circled and went under again, diving for the same spot.

When he came up, his master was beside him.

"Good dog!" he gasped and dived for the bottom.

It was dark down there. He drove himself deep with mighty sweeps of his arms, with powerful scissor-kicks of his long legs. He held his eyes wide open, and when he felt his ability to stay down longer slipping rapidly, he groped wildly. His hand touched a slimy snag; and then, lungs at the bursting-point, he was forced to shoot upward.

He broke the surface, shaking water from his eyes and gasping air. A babel of voices was in his ears.

He went further up-stream this time, and faced about and dived with the current, utilizing its flow. Again he found the snag, but that was all.

Again he dived, and this time he thought he caught a vague flash of lighter color in the murky depths as he drifted past. He rose quickly and swam his best to get back to a point from where he could dive again.

As he turned, he saw another swimmer so close to him again that his freedom of action was restricted. Straight black hair was plastered over a swarthy brow; angular black eyes looked past him



He Fastened Fingers in the Mat of Stiff Curly Hair.

Even in that moment of stress Kerry had time to remark that this was the face which had peered at him while he shaved this morning. . . . Common cause, surely, a child was drowning!

He went down again, down and down, deep and deeper. The depths hurt his eardrums; his lungs cried out for relief from this repeated strain. . . .

And then pressure was on his back; on the small of his back a hand was placed; fingers were fastening in his shirt. . . .

He kicked savagely, rolled over. He dashed a hand across his eyes, eluded the clutch and shot upward, gulped air through open mouth. A rod below him the swarthy man rose, spitting, and turned upstream. He gave Young one glance, and the dark eyes shone with malice.

Trying that! And now, of all times? The fellow was not even attempting to find the child; he was intent on bringing harm upon one who was. A bitter loathing sang in Kerry's heart for a moment, but he drove it away. No time, this, for personal animosities.

He took a deep breath and went down again, water hurting his ears, pressing against his throat. . . . And once more that vague blotch

of lighter color. . . . Sand? A boulder? A clay ledge? He expelled the air from his lungs and put all his will, all his heart and consciousness into a final downward stroke. His reaching hand touched something soft; his fingers entwined there. It was cloth! The current bore at him; his grip on the fabric held.

He dragged himself against the current, tugging at that garment, battling to dislodge it. . . . His head buzzed; a quick nausea spread through his vitals. He felt that this was his last instant of consciousness. His tortured lungs expanded, and water gushed into his throat. He wrenched mightily with the one hand, as a new, an inner darkness, engulfed him, and then gave up. . . . yielded, let his lungs have their way, and was shocked to find himself breathing sweet air.

He was on the surface, barely able to float, but he was not alone. In the crook of his arm was a limp, light body!

Upstream he heard screams and shouts. None had noticed that he came up with a burden. He drew the child's head to the surface, got a hand beneath her chin, and kicked feebly.

He tried to shout for help, but his voice was only a gurgle. He redoubled his efforts, but his strength was spent. And then a whine in his ear, and hot breath on his cheek, and Tip was there at his side.

"Good—" he gasped. "He!"

He fastened fingers in the mat of stiff curly hair; the dog angled across the current towing his master; Young's floundering feet touched bottom, and he reeled to the bank.

He dropped to his knees beside a log. He threw the little girl face down across it. He hooked a finger in the mouth, prying open the set jaws, flattening the tongue, and bore his weight down on her back. Water gushed from the mouth. Again he drove water from the small lungs, and again, while strength poured back into his own body.

Others were coming now; help was on the way. A man was almost to him; more streamed behind. But there was a job to do, and he knew how to do it, the task that would give strength to this last and perhaps waning hope.

Roughly he lifted the small body, with arms and legs so pitifully lifeless, and stretched it on the log, head lower than the feet. He jerked one of the child's arms beneath her face, rolled her head to one side, and straddling the log placed his great palms across the lower ribs and pressed firmly. . . .

He held the lungs compressed an instant and let the ribs spring outward. Down again went his weight, and water trickled from the mouth.

A distracted woman burst through the growing group. She tried to hurl herself on Young, on the child, and the men took her gently away.

"Keep 'em back," he gasped. "She'll want . . . all the air . . ."

Steadily he worked, watching that waxen profile for sign. Down . . . Hold . . . Up . . . Down again. The group was quiet now, watching with tensely stamped on faces.

"What do you think, Young?" someone asked.

He twisted his head doubtfully, and a sharp pang of dismay ran his heart.

The girl's one arm, hanging inert over the log, swayed dismally as he worked. . . .

Fifteen minutes; the watchers were moving and muttering. The child's eyes were half open. . . . Brown eyes, he saw.

Twenty minutes.

Figures were running along the high bank. A man hurtled down toward them, and the crowd parted to let him through. It was Jim Hinkle, panting, his face the color of suet. His eyes, large and desperate with query, turned to Young. This must be his child!

"Can't tell, Jim," Kerry replied to the unspoken question. "We should have an outside chance. And we won't quit!"

His shoulders and back ached. The inside of one knee had rubbed raw on the log.

And then Nan Downer was there, standing just inside the circle of men. One hand was at her lips and her eyes were dark with suspense. He smiled assurance at her as he worked. . . .

A full hour had passed since he carried her from the water. Now and again Jim Hinkle looked at Young, and his lips would twitch. Others were talking lowly, moving about, their tensely gone. Kerry could see shrugs and heads shaken. They had given up hope.

"Don't you think," Mel Knight, the storekeeper at the Landing, asked as he came close, "that it'd be as well . . . You see, they got to realize it sometime."

"No, we won't quit."

He had just started the pressure, but relaxed it. He held his hand on the small back and turned his head, intently waiting for what he had thought he felt to come again.

Then it came again. . . . Just the whisper of a cough!

"Careful, Jim! Steady now!" He held the trembling father back with one arm, and began to chafe one of the little girl's wrists rapidly.

He beckoned Nan to him.

"Get after the feet," he said quietly. "She's on her way."

Ten minutes later Kerry gave the moaning child into her father's arms and stood beside Nan, watching her carried tenderly away. The look on the mother's face, the vast relief and thanksgiving which showed in the very set of Jim's shoulders, touched things within Young.

A 'breed had turned to join the ragged procession moving up the bank.

"Who's the Injun?" he asked the girl, eyes following the great frame of the man, strength of which could not be concealed by the cotton shirt and faded overalls and moccasins.

"His name is Bluejay . . . Frank Bluejay," she answered; and then, as if pointedly: "Why?"

He shrugged. "He was spying on me from across the river this morning."

A slight gasp escaped her.

"Bluejay too! He's a bad citizen," she whispered. "Everyone distrusts him except Tod West. He works for him, when he works."

A hard smile came into Young's eyes and he nodded.

"When he works, eh?" he asked.

They parted then, Nan going toward the mill, Young mounting the trestle abutment slowly.

"Hi, Bluejay!" he hailed.

The 'breed turned, standing on the ties.

"What you want?" he asked, with the accent of his race, and his look was clearly a belligerent one.

Young did not answer until he had covered the distance between them. When, at arm's-length, Kerry stopped, he said quietly:

"I want to know this: why were you watching me from cover this morning? And when I've found that out, I'm going to ask you why you were fighting me under water down there?"

"Who's askin' that?" Bluejay asked. "You? Huh! I tell you; I say to you, it's none of your dam' business what I do!" He nodded slowly, head thrust forward. "I say somethin' more to you, eh? I say these; you got to hell outta here before somethin' very bad catch up with—"

He did not finish the threat. Sure of himself as a bad man well and long feared will be, he was unprepared for Kerry's quick move.

He swung sharply and stoutly, putting all his strength into the swing. His palm caught Bluejay on the ear with a stinging smack; the force of the blow rocked the man, swayed him off balance. He threw out his arms, teetering on one foot; he clawed the air twice, writhed and strained an instant to get the other foot down in time, and, falling, flung himself sidewise for the river in a half dive.

(TO BE CONTINUED)